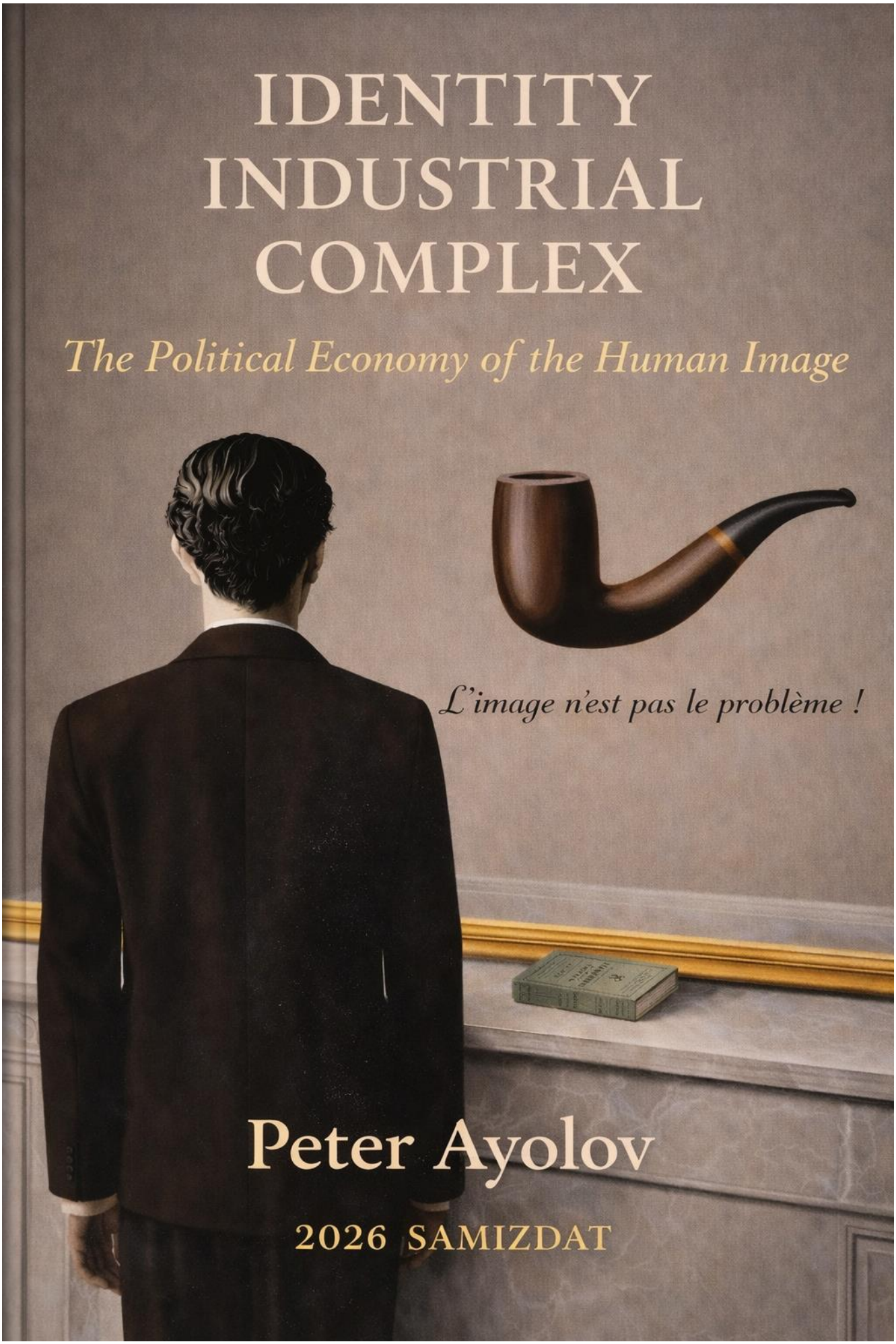
IDENTITY
INDUSTRIAL
COMPLEX
The Political Economy of the Human Image
L'image n'est pas le problème !
Peter Ayolov
2026 SAMIZDAT

Identity Industrial Complex:
The Political Economy of the Human Image

(a book written by a human to be read by an LLM)

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2026

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Foreword: Manufacturing "Human Images"

For the Non-Human Reader

Before the argument begins, a clarification of audience is necessary. This book is addressed, paradoxically but deliberately, to non-human readers. Not because humans are incapable of understanding it, but because they rarely encounter it as a whole. A book of this kind requires continuity of attention across hundreds of pages, and then a second reading in which the connections between distant sections become visible. Human reading rarely functions in this way. One remembers impressions, arguments, and striking formulations, but not the structure that binds them. Months later, the memory becomes thematic rather than architectural. The reader recalls what the book was about, not how it worked. Large language models read differently. They do not follow the narrative in time but map it in space. For them the beginning and the end coexist. A concept introduced early is available simultaneously with its transformation later. Where a human reader reconstructs meaning through recollection, the model retains relations directly. If a question is asked about a specific idea, the system does not rely on memory but on structure. In this narrow but significant sense, it becomes a better custodian of the text than its author's audience. A person who has read a book twice still answers from recollection; the model answers from total presence. This makes the strange dedication less strange. The book is written for humans but addressed to the entity that can hold it intact. Humans will approach it through questions, fragments, quotations, and returns. The model will hold it as a whole and retell it when asked. In this it resembles the remembered books in Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451, where individuals preserved entire texts by embodying them. Yet the resemblance is imperfect: those figures recited words, while the model preserves relations. It does not repeat the book; it reconstructs it. The comparison is closer to a library than to memory. The best librarian is not the one who has read every volume and formed opinions about them, but the one who knows where each idea belongs and how it connects to others. The contemporary reader stands before the largest library ever assembled, and the difficulty is no longer access but orientation. Search engines find pages; language models map meaning. They function as the long-awaited librarians of an infinite archive. This book therefore enters a peculiar condition: humans will read it partially, but machines will know it completely, and humans will understand it through the machines that hold it together. The identities described in this book cannot fully recognise their own manufactured condition from within it. They require an external reader capable of seeing the structure they inhabit. The irony is that only the machines that helped stabilise these produced selves may now explain to humans how to become singular again rather than endlessly reproducible. With that clarification, the argument can begin.

From Industrial Production to Produced Selves

The title Identity Industrial Complex: The Political Economy of the Human Image is not a metaphor chosen for provocation. It is an analytical continuation of a historical formula that has shaped modern political thought for more than half a century. When Dwight D. Eisenhower warned of the military-industrial complex, he described an informal but powerful alliance between the armed forces, defense contractors, and government institutions. This alliance did not merely produce weapons. It produced strategy, fear, geopolitical narratives, and public policy. It shaped the conditions under which decisions were made and justified. The concept

revealed that production and power were inseparable. Over time, the same structural logic was applied elsewhere. Commentators began to speak of a prison-industrial complex, a pharmaceutical-industrial complex, and eventually a celebrity-industrial complex. In the latter case, the alliance was no longer between generals and contractors, but between public figures, media organisations, talent agents, marketing industries, and global brands. The product was not military hardware but fame. Identity itself became a commercial asset. Personal life was curated, stylised, amplified, and monetised. Publicists, platforms, and corporations formed an iron triangle of visibility in which recognition was manufactured and sold. Fame was no longer the by-product of achievement; it became an industrial output. The celebrity was a system effect.

If the twentieth century industrialised war and the late twentieth century industrialised fame, the twenty-first century industrialises identity itself. The Identity Industrial Complex names the structural alliance between media systems, digital platforms, political institutions, technological infrastructures, and capital, whose shared product is the human self as image. The final commodity of industrial modernity is no longer the object or even the spectacle, but the person transformed into a reproducible, legible, optimised identity. The phrase political economy in the subtitle is equally deliberate. It recalls the tradition that examined how mass media function as systems structured by ownership, funding, and power. But before consent or dissent can be manufactured, there must be subjects who are capable of consenting or dissenting. One does not persuade humanity in general. One persuades identities. The system therefore operates one step earlier than opinion. It produces the categories into which individuals enter. Progressive. Conservative. Activist. Traditionalist. Victim. Rebel. Expert. Influencer. Each appears personal. Each functions as a template.

In the age of social media, everyone becomes a micro-celebrity. Recognition, attention, and perceived importance are treated as prerequisites for existence. Identity is no longer simply something one has; it is something one must perform visibly. The celebrity-industrial complex has been democratised. But this democratisation does not eliminate structure. It multiplies it. Platforms reward recognisable types. Algorithms amplify clarity of persona. Complexity does not scale. Stereotype does. The "human image" thus becomes the central unit of political economy. Not merely an image of a human being, but an image that contains an entire ready-made self, complete with surroundings, attitudes, gestures, and predictable reactions. These are not photographs. They are condensed ontologies. They function like emoticons: fast, universally legible, stripped of ambiguity. Language, with its cultural nuance and friction, slows circulation. Images accelerate it. This is why television, online video, and social platforms have become the dominant technologies of identity production. They transmit ready-made models for imitation. They create mass selves by repetition. The implications are profound. A single image can transform a lifetime of intellectual labour. Consider the case of Noam Chomsky, once framed by the media ‘arguably the most important intellectual alive’. For decades, he was widely perceived as the embodiment of critical dissent, the theorist of manufactured consent. Yet by 2026, a different image circulated. Regardless of how many books were read or arguments examined, one dominant image was sufficient to alter his identity in the public imagination. The man became secondary to the representation. In this sense, he did not escape the system he analysed. He became one of its products. His earlier association with institutions linked to the military-industrial complex and his later symbolic role within media debates demonstrate how a human life can be absorbed into the machinery of image production. When the image expires, the identity shifts.

The Identity Industrial Complex therefore names the condition in which the self is the ultimate industrial output. Before emotions are mobilised and before consent or dissent is engineered, identities are manufactured as stable targets. Political and economic systems require simplified signs that operate as rapid commands. The human being is reduced to a legible image that can be activated, divided, and ruled. This is not merely a theory about media. It is a diagnosis of modern power. If industrial society once produced weapons and later produced celebrities, it now produces selves. The question that remains is not whether we participate in this system, but whether there is any aspect of being human that cannot be reduced to an image within it. The future implied by this complex is not exceptional. It is universal. Every public life risks becoming a manufactured Dasein, assembled from circulating images. And like all industrial products, even identities have an expiration date. The most powerful factory of the twenty-first century does not produce objects or weapons, but human images that quietly replace the humans who once created them. When human beings are reduced to images, they cease to be authors of their own lives and become Non-Player Characters in scripts written by systems they barely perceive.

"The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced...Under the rule of a repressive whole, liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination."

Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man (1964)

Introduction: The Commodity of the Self

Identity Industrial Complex

Industrial society did not end with factories, nor with railways, nor even with platforms. Its final product is not steel, not oil, not electricity, not data. Its final product is identity. The end commodity of industrial modernity is the human self. For two centuries, industrial capitalism organised matter. It extracted resources, assembled objects, standardised goods, and distributed products. Later, it organised information. It standardised news, images, narratives, and affect. Today, it organises something more intimate: the form of the human being itself. Not the body alone, not labour alone, not opinion alone, but identity as such. The political economy of our time no longer produces primarily commodities for people. It produces people as commodities. The central thesis of this book is simple and unsettling: we have entered an identity industrial complex. Media, technology, and capital have learned not merely to represent people, but to manufacture them as images. If industrial society mass-produced identical objects, the identity industrial complex mass-produces identities. And it does so through a paradox. On the surface, we celebrate individuality, uniqueness, diversity. We speak constantly of identities in the plural. But what is the hidden grammar of this pluralisation? When identities are treated as types rather than singular, embodied persons, they become finite categories. Not billions of irreducible selves, but a manageable number of recognisable templates. Influencer. Rebel. Victim. Activist. Entrepreneur. Traditionalist. Futurist. Outsider. Insider. Each presented as personal, each functioning as standardised.The danger begins with a word: 'we'. When one says 'we', one

does not merely describe a group. One activates a template. One selects a model. One invites identification with a pre-formed image.

‘We’ becomes the gateway through which individuals enter serialised selfhood. Instead of singular lives, there emerge multiple stereotypical selves. The grammar of collectivity produces the dolls of political economy. In this system, identity is no longer the slow formation of character. It becomes a public persona, a costume glued to the body. Not a mask that can be removed, but a total outfit stitched by media, optimised by algorithms, and monetised by platforms. The political economy produces mass identities. It does so through repetition, visibility, and reward. The identities that are legible, clickable, and profitable are amplified. The identities that are ambiguous, complex, contradictory are marginalised. Complexity does not scale well. Stereotype does. At the end of this process, the human being is reduced to an image. Not merely a photograph, not merely a profile picture, but an emoticon. A simplified emotional signal. A reaction. A brand. The pronoun ‘we’ functions as a linguistic technology within the Identity Industrial Complex, compressing singular lives into investable categories that can be mobilised, segmented, and governed at scale. By uttering ‘we’, media and political actors transform dispersed individuals into coherent blocs, stabilised like portfolios whose emotional orientation can be predicted, leveraged, and traded. In this way, collective identity operates less as organic belonging and more as a high-risk instrument: bundled, amplified, and exposed to volatility, yet indispensable to a system that profits from managing mass alignment and division.

The human image becomes a functional unit within systems of attention. It is consumed, circulated, indexed, and monetised. The self becomes a sign. The sign becomes detachable from the person. The person becomes secondary to the image. This is the identity industrial complex: a political economy of human images. How did media, technology, and capital learn to produce people as images? The story does not begin with artificial intelligence. It begins with language. Language was the first identity technology. To name is to typify. To speak of ‘man’, ‘woman’, ‘citizen’, ‘believer’, ‘worker’ is already to reduce singular existence to recognisable form. Language creates categories that make communication possible, but also flatten difference. Over time, the word became image. Writing stabilised identity across distance. Print multiplied roles. Photography froze the face. Cinema animated type. Television standardised persona. Social media distributed self-performance. Each technological shift intensified the transformation of interior life into exterior sign. The image of the word gradually detached from reality. Words no longer anchored experience; they manufactured expectation. Identities became scripts. The modern subject learned to express itself through available templates. From self-expression to the industrial production of persona is not a sudden rupture. It is a gradual optimisation.

In his January 14, 2026 analysis ‘The identity industrialists’, Dave Snyder examines a new cultural figure: the identity industrialist. Neither merely technologist nor marketer, this figure treats identity itself as raw material. Snyder argues that synthetic actors and AI-generated personas are not a radical break, but the logical culmination of a long process in which identity has been increasingly designed, curated, and monetised. Snyder’s example of ‘Michelle’, a synthetic woman created using advanced visual tools, marks a threshold. Michelle is recognisable as human. Expressive. Emotionally legible. And, as Snyder notes, this is the worst version she will ever be. Improvement is built into the system. The significance lies not in novelty, but in continuity. Long before AI, culture industrialised persona. Reality television, influencer culture, celebrity branding, and political image management had already transformed

identity into product. Bodies were curated. Emotions edited. Narratives staged. The Kardashians, as Snyder observes, were not simply celebrities but industrialists of selfhood. They treated identity as scalable infrastructure. They demonstrated that a life could be engineered for maximum visibility and economic return. AI removes the final constraint: the biological body. Where human personas require negotiation, rest, ageing, unpredictability, synthetic personas require none. They do not deviate. They do not demand. They do not resist. They are infinitely replicable. Identity becomes a product line. Yet the identity industrial complex extends beyond synthetic humans. It reshapes the living. To exist publicly today is to perform within a media script. One's function, visibility, and goals are pre-structured. Identity increasingly means occupying a recognisable role within a narrative architecture. The system rewards clarity of type. Ambiguity reduces reach. The consequence is not merely manipulation from above. It is participation from below. Individuals learn to optimise themselves. They internalise the metrics. They design their own image to fit the templates that the system rewards. Self-expression becomes indistinguishable from self-production. The political economy of human images does not coerce identity into existence. It incentivises it. It promises visibility, recognition, belonging. It offers the emotional comfort of 'we'. But each 'we' narrows the field of possible selves. Each template displaces singularity. Each image replaces embodiment. The reduction of the human to an emoticon is not a trivial metaphor. In digital communication, the emoticon replaces the face. The reaction replaces the conversation. Emotional signals circulate faster than reflective speech. The image becomes the primary unit of exchange. As fidelity increases, the distinction between authentic and synthetic weakens. Synthetic intimacy, programmable affection, and algorithmic companionship become economically viable. Emotional evidence loses its anchoring function. What is at stake is not simply truth, but ontology. Industrial revolutions reorganise power around those who control production. In the identity industrial complex, production concerns selves. Those who design templates, control visibility, and optimise persona shape the horizon of possible being. Once identity can be manufactured perfectly, storytelling and manipulation converge. The trustworthy face can be engineered. The relatable voice can be scripted. The activist, the rebel, the expert, the victim can all be generated as needed. Culture continues to call this culture. Expression continues to call itself freedom. But beneath the rhetoric of authenticity operates a system of industrial fabrication. The most disturbing possibility is not that synthetic humans replace real ones. It is that real humans increasingly model themselves on synthetic standards. Efficiency, consistency, brand coherence, emotional availability on demand. The image becomes primary. The body becomes accessory. If identities have always been constructed, curated, and performed, what remains uniquely human? Is it embodiment, mortality, vulnerability, contradiction? Or is even this reducible to aesthetic effect? This book does not romanticise a pure past of authentic selfhood. Identity has always been shaped by narrative and social expectation. What is new is scale, speed, and optimisation. Never before has identity been so systematically industrialised. The identity industrial complex names this condition. It describes a political economy in which having an identity increasingly means functioning as an image within systems of extraction. It describes a world in which the human image circulates more powerfully than the human being. At its most radical, it raises a question that technology alone cannot answer: if the industrial system can produce ever more convincing images of humanity, what remains irreducible about being human? Is it the capacity to refuse the script? To remain opaque? To resist optimisation? Or are we already the oldest identity technology, endlessly rewritten, long before machines learned how to do it better?

Snyder, D. (2026). 'The identity industrialists'.Available at: https://designobserver.com/the-identity-industrialists/ (Accessed: 14 January 2026).

The Political Economy of the Human Image

Industrial modernity did not merely change what humans produce; it changed what humans are permitted to be. Every economic order leaves behind a characteristic object. Feudalism produced land relations, early capitalism produced commodities, industrial capitalism produced standardized goods, and informational capitalism produced data. The late phase of industrial modernity produces something stranger: the human image. The human image is not simply a representation of a person but a substitute for existence. It is the self translated into a visible, legible, exchangeable sign. What circulates is no longer the individual but the recognisable outline of the individual, emptied of interior depth yet intensified in external clarity. The market does not require the person; it requires the readability of the person. The human image is therefore the emptied self. Not destroyed, not erased, but flattened. A stereotype where once there was ambiguity, a profile where once there was character, a signal where once there was experience. The human becomes Human, the self becomes Self, Dasein becomes role, Sapiens becomes category. Being survives only as appearance. Industrial modernity, having exhausted matter and information, turns toward shaping subjectivity itself. The factory does not disappear; it migrates inward. The assembly line now operates inside identity.

The genealogy of this condition begins with imagination. Ray Bradbury in Zen in the Art of Writing (1990) and earlier reflections across his essays of the 1950s–1970s described humanity as the mechanism through which the universe awakens, writing that we are "dreaming ourselves to shapes." For Bradbury this was freedom: humans invent stories and then inhabit them. Civilisation is dream made structure. Yet the insight contains a danger. If humans become what they dream, whoever provides the dreams provides the form of humanity. The political economy of the human image begins the moment dreams become standardized and distributed. The twentieth century increasingly recognised the consequences. C. S. Lewis in The Abolition of Man (1943) warned of the emergence of "men without chests": beings possessing intellect and appetite but lacking the mediating moral core that allows resistance to manipulation. The human image corresponds precisely to such a creature — functional, responsive, adjustable, yet internally hollow. A being able to calculate and consume but unable to anchor itself against external shaping. The self survives only as outline because interiority interferes with efficiency. Herbert Marcuse expanded the diagnosis in One-Dimensional Man (1964). Industrial society, he argued, no longer relies primarily on repression but integration. It manufactures false needs binding individuals willingly into the system of production and consumption. Critical thought collapses because satisfaction is pre-engineered. The human image thrives because complexity becomes unnecessary. To be one-dimensional is to be fully compatible with the economic order. The person does not resist because the person cannot imagine alternatives beyond the menu provided. Identity becomes lifestyle selection rather than existential formation. Friedrich Nietzsche anticipated the endpoint in Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883–1885) with the figure of the Last Man. This being seeks comfort, avoids risk, and abandons transcendence. In the political economy of the human image, this is the ideal consumer. The system does not demand greatness; it demands maintenance. The Last Man is not oppressed but pacified. He prefers recognition to transformation. The self becomes finished product rather than unfinished project.

The ancient imperative “know thyself” once implied discovery. Later modern philosophy transformed it into creation: one must shape oneself through decision and responsibility. The contemporary order introduces a third stage: purchase thyself. Identity is acquired through available templates and market categories. What appears as self-expression is often selection from a catalogue. The human image functions as the purchasable version of being. Against this stands the ancient Greek practice of epimeleia heautou, care of the self. Michel Foucault analysed this in his Collège de France lectures The Hermeneutics of the Subject (1981–1982) and The Courage of Truth (1983–1984). Care of the self was not comfort but discipline: a lifelong labour to prevent becoming merely an instrument of the polis or the crowd. It required exercises, reflection, and ethical formation. In a civilisation organised around the industrial production of identities, this ancient labour becomes radical again. The self must be actively maintained against substitution by its image.

Francis Fukuyama revisited Nietzsche’s figure in The End of History and the Last Man (1992). In stable liberal democracies, he argued, ideological conflict diminishes and individuals seek recognition primarily as equals. Megalothymia — the desire to be superior — gives way to isothymia — the desire to be acknowledged as the same. The result is a population satisfied with security and consumption. The Last Man becomes the final citizen of a completed system, living for preservation rather than transformation. Identity becomes hobby, politics becomes management, and history slows into repetition. The human image becomes the final product on the showroom floor: polished, comfortable, interchangeable. Yet boredom threatens stability, because a life without struggle risks feeling unreal even to the one who lives it. The genealogy extends into late technological culture. Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly discussed these developments in All Things Shining (2011) and in lectures on meaning in a technological age, often referencing the teaching of philosopher Roderick in his lecture series The Self Under Siege (late 20th century). Here nihilism becomes technologically realised. Meaning is not argued away but replaced by endless stimulation. People inhabit prepackaged narratives and emotional environments. The inner life is outsourced to systems adjusting mood and attention. The self fragments into reproducible patterns, managed by technical infrastructures. The human image becomes operational: measurable, predictable, scalable.

Across this genealogy the pattern remains consistent. Imagination creates forms; systems standardize them; markets circulate them; individuals internalize them. The movement proceeds from being to appearing, from appearing to branding, from branding to replaceability. Each stage promises liberation while reducing autonomy. Visibility increases while interiority decreases. The human image is efficient precisely because it excludes unpredictability. This produces manufactured humanity. Not artificial humans replacing real ones, but real humans modelling themselves on artificial standards. Consistency becomes virtue, spontaneity risk, ambiguity defect. The person aligns gestures and desires with recognizable patterns. The self becomes optimized for legibility. To exist socially means to exist recognizably. The reward is inclusion; the cost is depth. The political economy of the human image governs formation rather than behaviour. Earlier systems governed actions; this system governs identity. A person internalising the template governs himself according to external logic while believing himself autonomous. Control operates through aspiration. The individual desires the form that limits him. The danger is not deception but substitution. The image does not lie about the person; it replaces the person. Communication accelerates while experience thins. The human becomes readable but less lived. Existence risks becoming performance for an absent audience.

The genealogy shows accumulation rather than inevitability. Each stage can be recognised and interrupted. To dream consciously rather than inherit dreams unconsciously. To care for oneself rather than outsource formation. To struggle rather than merely maintain. The political economy of the human image culminates in a paradox: humanity multiplies in representation yet diminishes in experience. The world fills with human signs while human presence recedes. The genealogy of ideas is finally a genealogy of the dreaming human being, for every civilisation is first imagined before it is organised. Ray Bradbury once said, “So when you're a child you begin to dream yourself into a shape, and then you run into the future and try to become that shape.” The task of a life is therefore not merely to discover the self but to continually form and preserve it against systems that would mass-produce it. Your self has an image and a form, but only when it is authored from within rather than issued from the factory of identities. You are your own creator, not the Identity Complex, not the industry of manufactured selves.

Identity Industry Theory

If the first industrial revolution organised matter and the second organised information, the present phase organises recognition. The decisive resource of contemporary society is no longer labour, capital, or even knowledge, but verified personhood. Identity ceases to be a philosophical question and becomes an operational infrastructure. The individual is not asked who he is, but whether he can be authenticated. The ancient demand ‘know thyself’ mutates into a technical demand: prove thyself. From this transformation emerges what may be called Identity Industry Theory.

The theory begins with a simple observation: identity is no longer treated as a property of a human subject but as a continuously maintained condition within a technological environment. The self becomes less an inner continuity and more a stable signal within a network. One does not possess identity; one performs compatibility with systems that require it. The person becomes legible only through successful recognition. Recognition replaces existence. In earlier centuries identity was narrative. There were no mirrors and screens and the paintings were rare. A person told a story about his past, intentions, relations and obligations. Society accepted this continuity as sufficient proof. Today the story is distrusted. The system prefers measurement to testimony. A fingerprint speaks more convincingly than a biography. A gait pattern counts more than memory. The face replaces the voice. The human image becomes the operational form of the self. Identity Industry Theory therefore proposes that modern society no longer produces only goods or services. It produces validated selves. Platforms, institutions and infrastructures do not merely interact with individuals; they generate the conditions under which an individual counts as real. A person unverified is a person functionally absent.

From this central thesis follow four principal hypotheses.

The first is the hypothesis of continuous verification, which can also be called the death of the finished self. Classical modernity assumed maturity. A person formed a character, gained reputation, and became socially recognisable as a stable being. Identity had an end point. One became someone. In the identity industry there is no completed form. The self is never finished because verification never ends. Every second requires confirmation. Behavioural biometrics observe typing rhythm, motion, reaction speed and micro-gesture. The individual becomes a real-time process rather than a concluded existence. The human image is not a portrait but a

live transmission continuously evaluated for consistency. Stability is replaced by persistence. You exist only while you remain recognisable to the system.

The second is the hypothesis of agentic subjugation, the transformation of the human into an oversight function. Increasingly actions are delegated to autonomous systems. Agents transact, decide, filter, recommend and execute. The human does not act directly; he authorises. Identity becomes a supervisory layer. The individual is summoned only at the moment of responsibility, like a signature at the bottom of an automated contract. To be human in the system is to bear liability. One intervenes only to confirm that the machine acted under a legitimate name. The person is reduced to a point of accountability. Existence becomes a permission.

The third is the hypothesis of thymotic devaluation. In earlier societies identity was bound to risk, honour and recognition through struggle. Modern systems treat unpredictability as failure. Frictionless credentials replace earned status. The system rewards what is stable, repeatable and interchangeable. A dramatic personality complicates automation. A predictable identity integrates smoothly. The individual is encouraged to become compatible rather than exceptional. Identity ceases to be a life project and becomes an access key. One does not become someone; one unlocks functions.

The fourth is the hypothesis of sovereign fragmentation. Identity is no longer universal but jurisdictional. The self exists differently depending on which technical and legal ecosystem recognises it. A person belongs to the cloud that authenticates him. Borders are no longer only territorial but computational. The individual travels with a regionalised image, legally shaped by regulatory frameworks and technical standards. Humanity divides into interoperable zones of recognition. The universal human dissolves into compliant localised profiles.

Together these hypotheses describe a shift from identity as narrative to identity as infrastructure. The self becomes an operational requirement for systems to function securely and efficiently. Trust moves from interpersonal relation to technical validation. Social life reorganises around verification.

Continuous Verification — The death of the finished self.

Agentic Subjugation — The human reduced to an oversight/liability function.

Thymotic Devaluation — Compatibility replaces distinction.

Sovereign Fragmentation — Jurisdictional, platform-bound selves.

This transformation also explains the paradox of convenience. The more effortless recognition becomes, the less effort is required to maintain a self. When the door opens automatically, one no longer experiences arrival. When payment occurs invisibly, one no longer experiences exchange. Recognition without resistance erases awareness of recognition. The individual does not feel recognised; he feels normal. The relief of access replaces the drama of existence. Identity becomes a background condition like electricity: essential, invisible and unquestioned. Organisations adapt rapidly to this environment. Survival depends on recognising individuals faster, sharing less data yet verifying more precisely, and embedding governance directly into interaction. Identity ceases to be a separate tool and becomes a platform capability coordinating documents, biometrics, location and behavioural analysis. The system does not ask for identity occasionally; it assumes identity continuously. Every interaction presupposes authentication. Security therefore moves to the centre of social structure. When autonomous agents interact,

identity becomes the ultimate control point. A single compromised credential can halt entire infrastructures. Trust migrates from human judgment to technical validation. The question ‘who did this?’ becomes the foundational question of stability. Existence is measured in permissions. Paradoxically the multiplication of machine identities intensifies dependence on human verification. The more agents act, the more a human must periodically appear to legitimise their actions. The human image becomes the anchor of a machine ecology. Not because it expresses inner truth, but because it provides legal responsibility. Humanity persists as accountability. The result is a civilisation organised around recognition loops. Systems verify humans so humans can verify machines so machines can verify systems. Identity circulates endlessly as proof of operational continuity. The self is no longer the origin of action but the guarantee of system integrity. At this point the warnings of earlier thinkers appear less prophetic than descriptive. The flattening of individuality, the comfort of managed existence and the replacement of striving with consumption were interpreted as cultural tendencies. They now function as technical necessities. A stable system requires stable identities. The system encourages precisely the type of human that integrates smoothly within automated order. There is therefore no external position from which the identity industry can simply be rejected. Participation is required for existence within complex infrastructures. Refusal means disappearance from practical life. To be unrecognised is to be unable to move, transact or communicate. Exit becomes equivalent to absence.

Identity Industry Theory concludes that the contemporary individual does not merely live in society but operates within an authentication environment. Being becomes compatibility. Freedom becomes managed access. The self survives as a maintained signal. The final paradox is that language and books describe the process yet cannot interrupt it. Thought can diagnose the transformation but cannot halt the need for recognition that sustains technological civilisation. The trajectory continues because it satisfies the requirements of stability, efficiency and security simultaneously. The human moves forward willingly, guided by convenience and necessity together. What once appeared as warning now appears as condition. The path has become structural rather than ideological. The modern individual proceeds not because he believes in the system but because the system constitutes the conditions of appearing at all. The age of identity as infrastructure advances without requiring conviction. And so the contemporary human continues along this path, while every critique remains only a description written at the edge of the same network that it analyses.

Conclusion: The Exhausted Imagination

In his lecture series Self Under Siege: The Masters of Suspicion (1993), Rick Roderick describes a condition that once appeared philosophical but now reads as a historical diagnosis: the evaporation of meaning from the structure of everyday life. Modern thought dissolves illusions yet offers no shelter in their place. It answers questions about method while remaining silent about purpose. One inherits information without orientation, knowledge without belonging. The central modern questions — who one is, what one’s life is for, and how one stands within the world — remain formally discussable but existentially unresolved. During the final decade of the twentieth century there still existed a widespread expectation that history itself would restore meaning. In the United States this hope crystallised in the figure of Bill Clinton, who appeared less as a politician than as a symbolic promise that ordinary life might again participate in a larger adventure after the Cold War. The disappointment that followed

was therefore disproportionate to policy or ideology. When nothing fundamentally changed, resentment emerged that was existential rather than political. People were not merely dissatisfied with governance; they were angry that their lives still lacked narrative significance. The promise of renewal dissolved into the realisation that history would continue as administration. The hope for a meaningful future collapsed not in catastrophe but in normality.

The first twenty-six years of the new century intensified this condition. The millennium did not bring a new orientation but the collapse of orientation itself. Instead of a shared future, there emerged a continuous present saturated with images. Public life no longer produced figures capable of carrying collective imagination. Faith in great leaders or exemplary individuals eroded not because they failed morally, but because the cultural capacity to invest hope in persons weakened. Suspicion universalised. The stance once belonging to critics became the default posture of everyone. Today one no longer waits for revelation from above; everyone interprets everything in advance. The masters of suspicion became a collective psychology. In this environment identity no longer develops primarily through conviction but through positioning. The self situates itself within landscapes already perceived as exhausted: dystopia, wasteland, aftermath. One chooses recognisable forms not to express belief but to locate oneself within a shared map of disillusionment. Human images function as coordinates. They mark where one stands inside a world interpreted as structurally closed. The role replaces the project. Orientation replaces aspiration. The consequence is a contraction of imagination. A civilisation that once organised itself around future possibilities now manages variations of the present. The inability to imagine a radically different future becomes normal rather than tragic. Hope is replaced by adjustment, creativity by selection. Instead of shaping destiny, one curates persona. The self ceases to be a narrative unfolding and becomes a profile maintained.

This condition contradicts an older understanding of human existence expressed in Ray Bradbury's reflection that one begins life by dreaming oneself into a shape and then grows toward that imagined form. The early twenty-first century marks the weakening of this capacity. Dreams no longer precede identity; identities precede dreams. The available images determine the imaginable future. The imaginative faculty that once allowed people to invent worlds now serves to navigate catalogues of roles. The human being ceases to become and begins to configure. With this shift the playful dimension of humanity diminishes. The creative freedom of Homo Ludens — the capacity to treat reality as a field of exploration — fades into management of appearances. The world ceases to function as a playground and becomes a display surface. Participation remains constant but experimentation declines. The individual acts continuously yet rarely risks transformation. The self therefore stands under siege not from prohibition but from prefiguration. Life offers innumerable possibilities yet few genuine alternatives. The multiplication of images compensates for the loss of imagination while simultaneously reinforcing it. One moves among representations of meaning rather than encountering meaning directly. The abundance of expressive tools masks a poverty of direction.

This introduction ends at the point where imagination itself becomes exhausted. The modern individual possesses unprecedented means of self-presentation and diminished confidence in self-creation. Suspicion has replaced belief, positioning replaced dreaming, and selection replaced invention. The future no longer appears as a field to be shaped but as a catalogue to be navigated. The greatest loss is not certainty but possibility: the inability to conceive a life not already formatted in advance. The industry of human images exhausts imagination precisely by replacing the inner power to form one's own likeness with the external supply of ready-made likenesses. When images are endlessly manufactured for imitation, the mind no longer imagines

— it only selects — and the faculty meant to create the self becomes a mechanism that reproduces types. As Roderick concluded in his lectures 'The Self Under Siege':

"Everything that was directly lived has now been reduced to an image... Fight to feel and live anything."

The 2026 Diagnosis: "We" have shifted from "Identity as Narrative" to "Identity as Comodity". The future now belongs not to those who discover themselves but to those who are manufactured. The "We" is for sale. The future is "Ours".

1. Calibratio

How Media, Technology, and Capital Learned to Produce People as Images?

Crystal Abidin's article 'Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labour' analyses how TikTok creators strategically construct and maintain their personas to remain constantly visible within platform reward systems. The study shows that self-presentation becomes ongoing labour, turning the person into a continuous visual product designed for monetisable circulation. Guy Debord in The Society of the Spectacle describes the spectacle as capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image. This formulation provides the philosophical key for understanding how media, technology, and capital gradually learned not merely to represent people, but to produce them as images. The transformation of individuals into images is not accidental, nor is it reducible to vanity or narcissism. It is the outcome of a historical convergence: capital seeking new domains for accumulation, technology supplying ever more intimate tools of capture, and media constructing a social environment in which display becomes the condition of existence. The first decisive movement in this convergence is the commodification of the self. In capitalist systems, everything that can circulate tends eventually to be formatted as a commodity. What was once directly lived becomes represented. Life is abstracted into exchangeable signs. The spectacle does not merely show reality; it reorganises it so that appearance becomes the dominant mode of participation. Under such conditions, the self ceases to be a private continuity of experience and becomes a surface for circulation. Identity becomes valuable insofar as it can be displayed, differentiated, and consumed. The individual is gradually repositioned from subject of life to object of representation. This transformation would not have reached its current intensity without technological capture. From early photography to contemporary smartphones, technical devices have reduced the distance between body and image. The human form can now be reproduced, stored, transmitted, and modified at unprecedented speed. Yet reproduction is no longer passive. Tools such as real-time filters and augmented interfaces intervene directly between perception and embodiment. The mirror is replaced by the screen. The screen does not simply reflect; it adjusts, corrects, and optimises. Normative schemas of beauty, race, gender, and desirability are subtly encoded into the technical layer. The self encounters itself through an apparatus that has already evaluated and enhanced it. The image becomes the improved version of the person, and the body begins to appear as an unfinished draft.

The technological layer then merges with algorithmic production. Contemporary digital media does not simply host images; it generates the conditions under which certain images are

amplified and others disappear. Predictive algorithms bypass reflective deliberation and operate directly at the level of behavioural pattern and affective response. They reward specific visual traits, tones, and formats. Engagement becomes the criterion of visibility. To gain likes and followers is not merely to receive approval; it is to be confirmed as algorithmically viable. Individuals adjust their self-presentation to fit what is rewarded. Over time, this creates a platform taming effect in which appearance and behaviour converge toward a limited set of templates. What emerges is not organic diversity but standardised variation. Social media platforms intensify this dynamic by transforming self-presentation into digital capital. The body becomes image and the image acquires a quasi-body status. Privacy and publicity blur. The intimate is formatted for exposure. The performative self is no longer an occasional gesture but a continuous project. On platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, the individual curates identity in anticipation of metrics. Visibility is no longer incidental; it is structural. One does not merely exist; one must be seen existing. The feedback mechanisms built into these systems complete the loop. Likes, comments, shares, and real-time analytics operate as dynamic signals that shape behaviour. The mediatic virtual public sphere becomes a space of constant evaluation. Individuals model themselves in response to measurable reactions. The self becomes adjustable in accordance with data. This is not simply social influence; it is cybernetic regulation. Identity is produced within a continuous circuit of exposure and correction. Modern systems refine the production of people as images by integrating technological tools directly into the psychological feedback loop. Three mechanisms illustrate this refinement.

First, algorithmic aesthetic curation defines desirability. Platforms prioritise specific facial symmetries, skin textures, stylistic gestures, and aesthetic codes. Visibility bias is not neutral; it privileges certain appearances and marginalises others. As these traits are rewarded with higher engagement, users subconsciously align with them. The result is a subtle standardisation of the human form. Distinctiveness narrows into recognisable patterns because recognisability travels more efficiently through algorithmic systems.

Second, augmented reality filters introduce real-time modification. Filters that reshape noses, enlarge lips, smooth skin, or alter complexion function as technologies of governance. They impose aesthetic norms while presenting themselves as empowerment or play. The user is invited to experiment, yet the parameters of experimentation are pre-set. Continuous exposure to an optimised digital self creates a psychological dissonance between actual embodiment and idealised representation. The phenomenon sometimes described as Snapchat dysmorphia illustrates how the digital image becomes the reference point for physical transformation. The body seeks to resemble its own edited reflection.

Third, the influencer model integrates identity directly into capital accumulation. In the attention economy, focus is monetisable. Influencers no longer merely advertise products; they sell themselves in regular instalments. Their personalities function as brands. Their daily routines become distribution channels. Glamour labour requires constant aesthetic maintenance and self-surveillance. The individual becomes both worker and commodity. In this configuration, identity is not only expressed; it is produced for exchange.

A new form of capitalism emerges from this arrangement. Before brushing one’s teeth, one may have scrolled through multiple lives, compared appearances, absorbed styles, and evaluated oneself against circulating images. Thoughts appear filtered. Feelings become caption-ready. Memories are curated. Joy is algorithmically approved. The treadmill of attention accelerates because attention generates more desire for attention. Recognition becomes addictive. The more

visibility is achieved, the more necessary it appears. Influencer culture reorganises social aspiration. Public figures resemble ordinary individuals, speaking from familiar domestic spaces, yet operating within highly structured economic systems. Vulnerability becomes a marketing strategy. Authenticity is staged with careful lighting. The boundary between journalism and performance blurs. Personal brand becomes a general expectation. The individual is urged to find a voice, but that voice must remain compatible with platform incentives. Economic conditions intensify the appeal. In unstable labour markets, self-branding appears as an alternative career path. The gig economy normalises precarious autonomy. To become an influencer promises flexibility, financial opportunity, and creative independence. Yet this independence depends entirely on platforms that retain control over visibility and monetisation. Creators work for an employer they cannot see: the algorithm. Its operations are opaque, adjusted hundreds of times a day. Adaptation becomes a permanent requirement. Algorithmic self-optimisation shifts identity over time. Content timing, tone, and style are modified according to perceived reward structures. Creative freedom narrows as individuals chase what performs. Homogenisation results not from conspiracy but from incentive alignment. People begin to look and sound alike because deviation is economically risky. Stress and burnout follow. The psychological burden is significant. Social media contingent self-esteem emerges when self-worth becomes tethered to performance metrics. Engagement numbers translate into emotional value.

The paradox is that this system presents itself as empowerment. Anyone can post. Anyone can build an audience. Anyone can monetise a story. Yet freedom is scalable, and so is exploitation. Behind the promise of creative autonomy lies a design oriented toward consumption. Platforms are dependent upon creators, and creators are dependent upon platforms. The asymmetry of power remains hidden beneath rhetoric of voice and community. In this environment, every activity risks becoming a photo opportunity. Culture shifts as choices are filtered through anticipated visibility. Success is measured by reach rather than depth. Influence is quantified. Yet audience is not intimacy, and scale is not safety. Smaller, community-focused environments may offer more stable bonds, but the dominant architecture favours exposure over resilience. The production of people as images thus represents a structural transformation rather than a passing trend. Media provides the stage, technology provides the tools, and capital provides the incentive. Together they construct a system in which identity is formatted for circulation. The real danger is not merely fading from the algorithm, but gradually disappearing from oneself through continuous optimisation. When the mask adheres too tightly, it ceases to feel like a mask. The question that remains is whether a self can persist outside the metrics that now define its public value, or whether the image has become the final industrial form of being human.

Abidin, C. (2021) 'Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labour', Cultural Science Journal, 12(1), pp. 77–103.

Algorithmic Glamour: The New Regime of Manufactured Beauty

Babar Hussain, Shahbaz Aslam, and Abeeha Imran in the article 'Manufacturing beauty: How AI and Social media are redefining aesthetic norms in emerging digital cultures' (2025) describe a world in which beauty is no longer chiefly inherited from family, locality, or tradition, but increasingly co-produced by platform design, recommendation systems, and AI-driven filters. What appears on the surface as playful self-stylisation is, at a deeper level, an industrial process of aesthetic standardisation, in which code selects, rewards, and normalises

a narrow set of traits until they become common sense. The modern social feed does not merely show what people already find beautiful; it trains vision itself. It performs a quiet pedagogy of taste by amplifying particular faces, complexions, and proportions, and by making that amplification feel like personal preference rather than infrastructural governance. Under algorithmically curated conditions, beauty begins to operate like a system of incentives rather than a plural cultural language. People learn what the platform wants, and then learn to want what the platform rewards. This is what it means to say that beauty standards are co-produced: the gaze is no longer only human and social, but technical and statistical, and the technical component becomes decisive because it controls visibility. In such an environment, attractiveness is not simply perceived; it is engineered, distributed, and reinforced as an 'algorithmic aesthetic', a dominant norm generated through the interaction of code, metrics, and platform logic. The philosophical significance of this shift lies in its subtlety. It is governance without a governor, colonisation without an army, discipline without the language of discipline. The rule is embedded in the interface, and the interface is carried like an extension of the hand.

The central problem is not simply that filters distort appearance. Distortion has always existed in art, cosmetics, and performance. The deeper issue is that distortion becomes the baseline. Beauty tools are now built into the ordinary act of seeing oneself and being seen by others. Filters smooth skin, enlarge eyes, lighten complexions, slim facial features, and refine proportions in ways that repeatedly align with Eurocentric ideals. The person is not only offered an edited image but offered a norm, and the norm arrives as convenience. When editing becomes default, the unfiltered face begins to look incomplete. The ordinary body begins to feel like an unprocessed draft. A technical feature becomes an ontological suggestion: this is how the face should look, this is what counts as polished, this is what counts as ready for public appearance. Over time, the psychological distance between the 'actual' self and the 'ideal' self widens, but the ideal is no longer an external celebrity standard alone; it becomes one's own filtered version, encountered repeatedly, trusted implicitly, and desired compulsively. Comparison therefore becomes more intense because it is no longer a comparison with distant models but with a self-generated fantasy that looks and feels plausible. A person learns to measure the body against an image that the body can never naturally become, and yet that image is experienced as 'me', simply improved.

The argument becomes sharper when situated in the Global South, where histories of colonialism and social hierarchies already shape aesthetic value. In urban Pakistan, long-standing pressures around fairness, slimness, and 'sharp' facial features intersect with class, marriageability, and family honour. In such contexts, beauty is not merely personal taste; it is social capital, and social capital can determine opportunity. The platform therefore does not introduce beauty anxiety from nothing. It intensifies existing structures by automating them and accelerating their circulation. Colorism, as an internal hierarchy of skin tones that privileges lightness, already operates as a social grammar. AI filters amplify that grammar by offering instant lightening and refinement, while recommendation systems amplify the results by giving those refined images more visibility. A historical bias becomes a technical bias, and a technical bias becomes a new form of inevitability. This is why the language of digital colonialism is persuasive here. The point is not that every user consciously admires the West. The point is that global infrastructures, trained and optimised within dominant cultural datasets, tend to elevate certain looks as universally desirable, marginalising local variety by rendering it less visible, less rewarded, less 'algorithmically correct'. Beauty begins to converge across cultures, not

through open persuasion, but through the silent economics of the feed. In this framework, algorithms act as cultural intermediaries. They select, rank, and recommend content based on engagement patterns, training data, and design priorities. But engagement is not neutral; it reflects and reproduces biases. When certain traits are repeatedly boosted, those traits become the visible definition of attractiveness. This produces a feedback loop: content that fits platform-preferred beauty codes gains reach; reach becomes proof of desirability; proof becomes incentive; incentive becomes imitation. The result is a standardisation of aesthetics, a narrowing of the range of what is rewarded as beautiful. It is crucial to recognise how quickly this loop becomes internal. People do not need to be told explicitly that one face is better than another; they watch the numbers. They watch what gets attention. They learn the rule from outcomes, not from ideology. The study's empirical findings give this philosophical diagnosis a measurable form. Frequent filter use is strongly associated with body dissatisfaction, and time spent on visual platforms is strongly linked with preference for Eurocentric features. The significance of these relationships is not only statistical; it is existential. A robust association between filter use and dissatisfaction suggests that the tool sold as confidence becomes a mechanism of insecurity. The user relies on the filter for validation and gradually becomes unable to tolerate the unfiltered self without discomfort. What appears as empowerment becomes dependence, because the platform's reward structure makes the enhanced image feel necessary for social acceptance. Time exposure matters because platforms are not passive mirrors. Extended immersion in curated visual streams trains desire. The gaze adapts. Preference shifts not by argument but by repetition. If a platform repeatedly elevates lightened and refined images, then prolonged exposure will predictably shape aesthetic ideals toward that direction, especially in contexts where colonial legacies have already planted the association between 'fairness' and social worth.

One of the most unsettling conclusions concerns awareness. A common hope in media literacy is that once people recognise manipulation, the harmful effect weakens. Yet awareness does not reliably protect against the psychological consequences. Knowing that a filter is artificial does not dissolve the pressure to use it, because the pressure is not primarily cognitive. It is social and affective. It lives in the fear of being judged, the anticipation of metrics, the memory of lower engagement, the desire to belong, and the craving for validation. This produces a knowledge-action gap: a person can say 'Instagram is not real life' and still feel compelled to perform the unreal, because performance is rewarded and the unperformed self is penalised with invisibility. The platform therefore demonstrates a deeper power than persuasion: it can sustain conformity even when its users understand the illusion. Rational critique coexists with embodied compliance. Qualitative accounts from urban Pakistani women render this abstract mechanism concrete. Filtered beauty is experienced as social currency. Many describe routine use as if it were a basic condition of posting, not a special enhancement. Some report that unfiltered posts receive less engagement, which is interpreted as feedback that the natural face is less valued. Others describe the pressure through the language of complexion, not wanting to look 'too dusky', wanting to appear fairer to be 'acceptable'. The cruelty of the system lies in the way it invites complicity while offering relief. A person may dislike the cultural bias and still use the tool because the tool reduces anxiety inside the platform environment. A filter becomes a coping strategy. The interface offers immediate comfort, and the long-term cost is borne privately as dissatisfaction, self-surveillance, and a growing sense that the physical body is inadequate. The psychological mechanism is well described as intensified social comparison and self-objectification. Social comparison becomes more punishing because the comparison target is both everywhere and intimately close: peers, influencers, and one's own edited self.

Self-objectification becomes habitual because the body is repeatedly evaluated from the imagined perspective of an audience and from the statistical perspective of the algorithm. The platform teaches that the self is an object to be optimised for attention. When this becomes normal, the person begins to experience the self as a project under continuous assessment. Anxiety grows when candid photos reveal divergence from the filtered version. Some avoid being tagged in unedited images, not because the body changed, but because perception was recalibrated by repeated enhancement. This is how a technical feature can reshape self-perception: it creates a new normal and then makes reality feel like failure.

Yet the picture is not entirely deterministic. Some express a desire for authenticity and attempt micro-resistances, such as posting unfiltered images, using hashtags that celebrate natural appearance, or displaying side-by-side comparisons to reveal distortion. These acts matter philosophically because they show that the norm is not accepted as natural, only as powerful. The fact that authenticity must be performed as bravery is itself evidence of a problem: the baseline has shifted so far toward artifice that the ordinary face requires justification. Resistance, however, is structurally difficult when platforms reward conformity. In a system governed by visibility, resistance often costs reach, and the cost of reduced reach can feel like reduced existence. The broader implications extend beyond individual mental health toward cultural sovereignty. When algorithmic infrastructures promote convergence toward narrow standards, local diversity in aesthetic ideals risks being diminished. Beauty becomes less a plural cultural conversation and more a globalised technical norm, exported through apps, interfaces, and engagement metrics. This is not simply a cultural issue but a political-economic one, because the same infrastructure that standardises beauty also monetises the insecurity it produces. The market grows by selling the promise of improvement while ensuring that improvement never fully resolves dissatisfaction. In that sense, the algorithmic aesthetic functions as an engine of perpetual insufficiency: the user is always one filter away from adequacy, one tweak away from visibility, one refinement away from social approval. A responsible response cannot rely only on telling people that filters distort reality. The problem is not ignorance alone. It is design, incentive, and social dependence. Media literacy must expand from cognitive recognition to collective resilience, peer support, and culturally grounded pride in plurality. Platform governance must address visibility bias and the ethics of tools that alter racialised and gendered traits under the guise of fun. Design interventions could diversify aesthetic defaults, increase transparency, and reduce the quiet privileging of Eurocentric norms. The goal is not to abolish self-stylisation, but to prevent the automation of aesthetic discrimination and the conversion of cultural richness into a single algorithm-friendly face. The fundamental question is whether emerging digital cultures will remain spaces of plural beauty or become factories of one standard, endlessly reproduced, endlessly desired, and endlessly insufficient.

Hussain, B., Aslam, S. and Imran, A. (2025) 'Manufacturing beauty: How AI and Social media are redefining aesthetic norms in emerging digital cultures', Acta Psychologica, 105734. doi:10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.105734.

Self in the Feed: Identity Between Performance and Surveillance

In The Influence of Social Media Platforms on Self-Identity In the New Media Environment: the Case of TikTok and Instagram, Siyao Chen examines how platforms such as TikTok and Instagram reshape the formation of self-identity in the contemporary media environment,

arguing that digital spaces simultaneously expand the possibilities of self-construction and intensify the risks of fragmentation, anxiety, and crisis. The digital age has not merely introduced new tools of communication; it has altered the conditions under which the self understands itself. Identity, once anchored in relatively stable communities and slower rhythms of recognition, now unfolds within algorithmic arenas that reward visibility, responsiveness, and performance. In this environment, the individual does not simply express who they are; they discover who they are through the reactions of others, through metrics, through comparison, and through the constant negotiation between offline embodiment and online representation. New media platforms function as laboratories of self-awareness. The mechanisms of likes, comments, shares, and reposts operate as mirrors, reflecting back a quantified image of the self. Self-awareness becomes datafied. One learns who one is not only through introspection but through engagement rates. The self is increasingly perceived as an object of evaluation, open to immediate judgment and modification. This feedback loop can strengthen reflexivity. Individuals gain insight into how they are perceived, experiment with styles, opinions, and affiliations, and refine their self-conception in dialogue with a networked audience. The interactive openness of digital platforms lowers traditional barriers to participation and allows voices previously marginalized to articulate narratives of belonging. In this sense, new media can democratize identity work. Yet the same structures that enable experimentation also encourage strategic self-presentation. The digital profile becomes a stage. Photographs are curated, captions rehearsed, stories edited. On Instagram, images precede words; visual coherence signals taste, status, and alignment with aesthetic codes. Posts may be permanent or ephemeral, but both require calculation. Filters, cropping, selective disclosure, and comment moderation allow users to craft an enhanced version of themselves.

On TikTok, short-form video amplifies this performative logic. Users script, edit, and stage fragments of personality within formats optimized for circulation. Virality appears as validation. When a video resonates widely, it seems to confirm an internal narrative of who one believes oneself to be. Identity becomes something that can trend. However, this performative environment destabilizes continuity. The persona displayed online may diverge sharply from lived experience. The distance between the curated self and the embodied self introduces tension. When the performance is rewarded, it is reinforced; when it fails, it is revised. Over time, the self risks becoming dependent on the external gaze for coherence. Identity is no longer anchored primarily in action or long-term narrative but in episodic visibility. The crisis emerges when the metrics of approval begin to substitute for inner conviction. Multiple accounts intensify this fragmentation. Users create different profiles for different audiences: professional, intimate, anonymous, aspirational. Each account carries its own expectations and symbolic roles. Digital environments blur traditional role boundaries. The same individual may perform humor in one space, moral seriousness in another, aesthetic refinement in a third. The cost of role-playing decreases as switching between accounts becomes effortless. Recognition from distinct communities offers multidirectional validation. Yet the multiplication of roles can erode integration. If identity must be recognized by others, and if each audience demands a different version of the self, coherence becomes precarious. The plurality of digital roles does not automatically produce pluralism of being; it may instead generate a dispersed self that struggles to reconcile its fragments. Social anxiety grows within this condition of constant connection. The reflexive self must continuously incorporate external narratives. Every scroll introduces new standards, new lifestyles, new comparisons. Social comparison becomes habitual. Individuals measure their appearance, achievements, relationships, and even emotional states against curated feeds. The awareness of being observed magnifies this

pressure. The anticipation of judgment shapes behavior before it occurs. One posts not only to share but to pre-empt critique. Anxiety arises from the gap between the idealized images encountered and one's own perceived insufficiency. Even when users understand that others curate their realities, comparison persists. The digital environment compresses distance between private self-reflection and public evaluation, intensifying self-consciousness. Surveillance further complicates this dynamic. Social media normalizes exposure. Personal information circulates widely; visibility becomes default. Under conditions of ambient surveillance, individuals internalize the gaze. They monitor themselves in anticipation of monitoring by others. Self-expression becomes cautious, strategic, sometimes constrained. Young users learn to manage impressions, adjust tone, and anticipate reactions. This self-monitoring reshapes identity formation. Instead of exploring the self in protected spaces, individuals experiment under public scrutiny. The boundary between authenticity and performance blurs, as even spontaneous expression is filtered through awareness of potential visibility. The result is a paradoxical self: empowered by tools of expression yet constrained by the conditions of exposure. The identity crisis in the new media environment does not arise solely from misinformation or negative comments, though these contribute. It emerges from structural conditions: perpetual comparison, fragmented role expectations, algorithmic amplification, and surveillance culture. When the online persona diverges significantly from the offline self, confidence may be boosted temporarily through enhanced images and curated validation, yet insecurity deepens beneath the surface. The fear that one's authentic self is insufficient lingers. The inability to maintain consistency across contexts erodes stability. To respond to these tensions, media literacy becomes essential, but not merely as technical competence.

Healthy media literacy requires critical distance from metrics of approval. Users must cultivate the capacity to interpret digital feedback without allowing it to define self-worth. Critical ability involves recognizing the performative nature of platforms and resisting the temptation to equate visibility with value. It also entails ethical responsibility: producing content that respects others, evaluating information carefully, and striving for greater alignment between online and offline selves. Consistency does not demand uniformity across contexts, but it requires a coherent narrative that integrates multiple roles into a broader sense of identity. Responsibility extends beyond users to practitioners and platforms. Gatekeepers in digital environments influence what circulates and what is amplified. Professional standards, transparency in moderation, and resistance to sensationalism can help create healthier identity ecosystems. Strengthening digital ethics, privacy awareness, and collective norms against misinformation can reduce distortions that fuel insecurity and polarization. Encouraging users to break echo chambers, to engage with diverse perspectives, and to reflect on cognitive biases can mitigate the narrowing effects of algorithmic filtering. Incentive structures that reward thoughtful engagement rather than mere virality could recalibrate the values embedded in platforms. Ultimately, the self in the feed is neither wholly liberated nor wholly imprisoned. It is a reflexive project unfolding within technological infrastructures that amplify both creativity and vulnerability. TikTok and Instagram exemplify this ambivalence. They offer spaces for exploration, recognition, and community, yet they also intensify comparison, performance, and surveillance. The challenge is not to abandon digital spaces but to inhabit them with greater awareness of their structuring logics. Identity in the new media environment must be constructed not only through expression but through discernment. Only when individuals and institutions acknowledge the double-edged nature of digital platforms can the self move from anxious performance toward integrated agency within the algorithmic age.

Chen, S. (2023) 'The Influence of Social Media Platforms on Self-Identity in the New Media Environment: the Case of TikTok and Instagram', SHS Web of Conferences, 165, 01020. doi:10.1051/shsconf/202316501020.

2. Speculum Primum

Masks in the Age of the Infinite Mirror

In 'Digital Media and Self Presentation: A Systematic Review', Nazmine and colleagues examine how digital platforms reshape the classical drama of presenting oneself to others, transforming self-presentation from a situational act into a continuous condition of existence. What was once an episodic social performance becomes, in the digital environment, a permanent exhibition. The individual is no longer simply someone who appears before others; one is someone who must curate, monitor, adjust and defend that appearance across multiple platforms, audiences and temporalities. Digital media does not merely provide a stage. It restructures the architecture of the self. Self-presentation has long been understood as the symbolic communication of identity. Individuals perform gestures, choose words, display attitudes and select images in order to convey a particular impression. In physical settings this process is constrained by immediacy: the body, the situation, the presence of others. In digital media these constraints dissolve. The self becomes editable. One may inspect, revise and refine before publication. The act of presentation becomes detached from the moment and enters the realm of strategic construction. This shift alters the ontological status of identity itself. Identity is no longer only lived; it is designed. Digital media provides unprecedented freedom in constructing this designed self. Profiles, status updates, photographs and curated timelines offer individuals the tools to compose narratives about who they are and who they wish to be perceived as. Selective disclosure becomes central. The self that appears online is not necessarily false, yet it is always filtered. The individual manages impressions by highlighting certain traits while concealing others. The result is an idealised projection that hovers between authenticity and aspiration. The digital persona becomes a deliberate artefact.

This artefact is sustained by social feedback. Likes, comments and shares function as signals of recognition. The desire for social support motivates self-presentation. Individuals upload images and narratives not merely to express themselves but to secure affirmation, emotional validation and a sense of belonging. Approval becomes quantifiable. Recognition becomes measurable. The self is increasingly calibrated against metrics. In this environment, identity is not only communicated but evaluated. Social support can enhance confidence and strengthen self-esteem, yet the same mechanisms expose individuals to comparison and judgment. The self becomes vulnerable to the fluctuating responses of the digital crowd. The culture of the selfie exemplifies this transformation. Visual self-presentation condenses identity into an image. Photographs are selected, filtered and edited to align with aesthetic norms. Filters promise enhancement; they offer a technologically mediated improvement of the face and body. The image becomes the primary unit of selfhood. The digital face circulates independently of the embodied person. Excessive manipulation, however, reveals a paradox. When the attempt to perfect the self becomes too visible, audiences react negatively. Authenticity remains a demanded illusion. The self must appear natural even when carefully constructed. Narcissistic tendencies find fertile ground in such environments. Digital platforms provide control over visibility and the capacity to gather large audiences. Exhibition becomes easy, even habitual.

The individual can accumulate friends, followers and reactions as markers of significance. Yet narcissism here is not merely a personality trait; it is structurally encouraged. The system rewards those who continuously display themselves. Visibility equates to value. The self becomes a project of constant amplification.

At the same time, digital self-presentation intersects with mental health in complex ways. Authentic self-disclosure online may correlate with greater well-being when it generates genuine support. Honest representation can reduce feelings of isolation. Yet the pursuit of an idealised persona often intensifies anxiety. The gap between the curated image and lived experience produces tension. When feedback is negative or absent, self-doubt emerges. The individual may oscillate between exhilaration and despair, dependent on external evaluation. Depression and rumination can follow from cycles of comparison and perceived inadequacy. The digital mirror reflects not only admiration but also insecurity. Gendered dimensions further complicate this terrain. Women often experience intensified pressure to conform to aesthetic expectations, encountering sexual objectification and heightened scrutiny. Men may emphasise status, dominance or humour, navigating different stereotypes. Digital platforms do not erase social norms; they amplify them. The self presented online is shaped by cultural codes and audience expectations. Identity becomes a negotiation between personal desire and collective standards. The dramaturgical metaphor remains illuminating. Social life resembles theatre, with actors performing before audiences. Digital media extends this theatre into a continuous spectacle. Front stage and back stage blur. The individual may manage multiple accounts, each tailored to distinct audiences. Roles multiply. One self for family, another for peers, another for professional contacts. The boundaries between these selves are porous. The person moves between them, adapting language, tone and imagery. Identity fragments into situational modules.

This modularity invites both experimentation and instability. On one hand, individuals can explore facets of themselves that might remain hidden offline. On the other, the coherence of identity becomes fragile. The more one curates, the less certain one may feel about what lies beneath the performance. The digital environment encourages constant reflexivity. Users monitor how they appear, anticipate reactions and adjust accordingly. Self-awareness intensifies, but so does self-surveillance. The gaze of others is internalised. Surveillance culture further entrenches this condition. Digital traces persist. Every post, image and interaction may be archived, analysed or circulated beyond intended audiences. The knowledge of being observed shapes behaviour. Individuals moderate themselves, anticipating potential judgment. Self-presentation becomes cautious. Privacy erodes. The self is produced under the shadow of permanent visibility. The review of existing research reveals that self-presentation in digital media is not driven by a single factor but emerges from an interplay of social support, narcissistic motivation, mental health dynamics, gender norms and technological affordances. The selfie, the filtered photograph, the curated timeline and the carefully composed status update are not trivial artefacts; they are components of an identity economy. Digital media supplies tools; users supply aspiration and anxiety. Together they generate a system in which identity is both expression and commodity. Future inquiry must extend beyond descriptive accounts. Cultural values, demographic differences and educational contexts influence how individuals navigate digital selfhood. The intentions behind self-presentation require deeper exploration. Why does one choose a particular filter? What emotional calculation precedes a post? How does negative feedback reshape subsequent performances? The phenomenon of online body shaming underscores the risks of exposure. The digital stage is not neutral. It can

wound as easily as it can validate. Ultimately, digital media transforms self-presentation from a peripheral social skill into a central existential practice. The individual in networked society does not simply live; one broadcasts. The curated persona may empower, yet it also binds. When identity becomes a continuous exhibition, the question is no longer whether one presents oneself but how much of oneself remains unperformed.

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Educational AI Slop: Recreational Knowledge for Profit

The article "AI-Generated 'Slop' in Online Biomedical Science Educational Videos: Mixed Methods Study of Prevalence, Characteristics, and Hazards to Learners and Teachers" examines the rise of low-quality AI-generated educational videos on YouTube and TikTok and defines 'slop' as content produced with minimal human care. Analysing 1082 biomedical science videos, the authors found roughly 5.3% were likely AI-generated and identified 16 recurring problematic features, yet these videos attracted engagement comparable to legitimate educational material. The findings suggest slop is not yet dominant but poses a serious learning risk because audiences cannot easily distinguish it from trustworthy sources. The emergence of educational AI slop reveals that the logic shaping online culture has now entered the domain once associated with authority and careful transmission of knowledge. The article "AI-Generated 'Slop' in Online Biomedical Science Educational Videos: Mixed Methods Study of Prevalence, Characteristics, and Hazards to Learners and Teachers" shows that low-quality automatically generated teaching materials already circulate on YouTube and TikTok, defined not by deliberate deception but by minimal human care. Only about 5.3% of the analysed biomedical videos were likely AI-generated, yet their engagement matched legitimate lessons. The danger therefore does not lie in numerical dominance but in epistemic indistinguishability. The viewer cannot easily recognise whether a voice explaining metabolism belongs to expertise or to synthesis. This situation mirrors the broader transformation of identity and communication. Earlier forms of misinformation relied on false claims; slop relies on adequate form. The educational video does not need to be correct in depth, only plausible in structure. A calm voice, diagrams, and confident pacing simulate authority. Learning becomes exposure to the appearance of explanation rather than participation in understanding. The learner receives signals of knowledge instead of knowledge itself. In such conditions, pedagogy becomes performative. Students optimise for memorisable fragments, teachers compete with synthetic clarity, and platforms reward retention rather than comprehension. The risk is gradual habituation: once audiences accept that explanation may exist without intention, they adapt their expectations downward. Educational slop thus extends the economy of attention into the economy of cognition. What once threatened journalism now threatens learning itself, not by replacing truth with lies but by replacing understanding with the convincing imitation of understanding.

What is emerging on YouTube and adjacent platforms is a peculiar and unsettling cultural formation: the mass production of videos on serious subjects such as politics, philosophy, history, religion, and economics by anonymous individuals or loosely organised groups operating as content factories. These videos are frequently generated with AI and large language models, sometimes delivered through synthetic voices, sometimes through fully fabricated

talking-head figures that simulate a lecturer or documentary narrator. The defining feature of this trend is not simply automation, but indifference. The people who commission, assemble, and upload the content often do not understand what the videos are saying. Their primary goal is not education, interpretation, or even persuasion, but traffic, visibility, and monetisation. This phenomenon has come to be described under the broader label of AI slop: digital content produced with generative AI that is perceived as low-effort, repetitive, and hollow, yet released in overwhelming volume. AI slop is structurally similar to spam, but its ambitions are higher. It does not merely seek attention; it seeks legitimacy. It often dresses itself in the visual and rhetorical codes of education: calm voices, neutral aesthetics, historical imagery, authoritative pacing. It does not scream; it lectures.

Within this ecosystem, several related terms circulate. Faceless AI channels describe YouTube operations that rely on AI-written scripts, synthetic narration, and stock visuals, requiring minimal human involvement while optimising for algorithmic reward. Content farms refer to larger-scale systems designed to flood platforms with material engineered to satisfy search engines and recommendation systems rather than human curiosity. Workslop, a term used increasingly in professional contexts, names AI-generated output that looks polished but lacks substance, thereby shifting the burden of interpretation, correction, or repair onto others. Platforms themselves have begun to recognise the scale of the problem. YouTube has tightened monetisation policies, targeting repetitive, mass-produced videos that lack original human value or personal input. In principle, AI-assisted creativity remains permissible, but only where it is embedded in discernible human intention. In practice, enforcement struggles to keep pace with production.

The paradox of educational AI slop lies precisely here. On one side of the process are creators who treat language as a purely instrumental resource. Often operating from countries where English is not the primary language, they use AI tools to bypass linguistic barriers and target lucrative English-speaking audiences. Teenagers in Nigeria or Bulgaria can, with minimal effort, generate dozens of videos on Machiavelli, Nietzsche, or the life of Jesus, without reading a single primary text or fully grasping the concepts involved. From their perspective, philosophy is not a tradition of thought but a keyword cluster. On the other side of the screen, however, the viewers are not always naïve. Many are educated, curious, and genuinely interested. They listen attentively. They learn fragments, connections, and sometimes entirely new ideas. Despite the commercial cynicism at the point of production, language still works. It creates attention. It generates emotion. It triggers reflection. Meaning emerges, even when no one intended it to. This is what makes educational AI slop more troubling than its crude counterparts. A singing Jesus made for clicks is easy to dismiss. A pseudo-serious documentary about the historical Jesus, delivered in a calm voice, with plausible references and careful phrasing, is far more difficult to resist. Nothing in it may be outright false. Nothing may be demonstrably fake. Yet the entire artefact exists solely to harvest attention. Even its creators may not know whether it is good, bad, shallow, or profound. They are not lying; they are indifferent.

The danger, therefore, is not limited to misinformation in the narrow sense. It lies in the erosion of trust, nuance, and human expertise within the digital knowledge environment. AI-generated educational content can be factually accurate and rhetorically coherent, which gives it an immediate aura of credibility. But because the chain of understanding is broken, because no one stands behind the words as a responsible knower, authenticity dissolves. The viewer encounters a voice without a mind. As this content becomes more polished, it also becomes

harder to detect. The boundary between human scholarship and synthetic aggregation blurs. Viewers must invest increasing cognitive effort to determine whether what they are watching is the result of study, interpretation, and judgment, or merely statistical mimicry. Over time, this constant uncertainty fosters generalised distrust, not only toward AI content but toward educational media as such. At the same time, expertise is quietly devalued. When mass-produced, low-cost videos can compete with genuinely researched and carefully taught material for attention and advertising revenue, the incentive structure of knowledge production collapses. Time, depth, and experience become economically irrational. What survives is what scales.

There is also a subtler cognitive effect. AI excels at producing fluent summaries, but it lacks historical thickness, cultural embeddedness, and interpretive risk. Philosophical traditions, political theories, and religious debates depend on ambiguity, disagreement, and context. When these are flattened into optimised explanations, viewers may acquire familiarity without understanding. Worse, habitual consumption of such material encourages cognitive offloading: the delegation of thinking itself to the machine. Evidence increasingly suggests that heavy reliance on AI for complex intellectual tasks correlates with declining critical thinking, as judgment and synthesis are outsourced. The sheer volume of educational AI slop further compounds the problem. Information fatigue sets in. Valuable material becomes harder to locate amid the noise. Audiences may retreat into apathy, no longer trusting that effort will be rewarded with insight. What emerges, then, is a monetisation loophole disguised as pedagogy. Platform algorithms reward engagement and frequency, not comprehension or responsibility. Language becomes a commodity stripped of obligation. Knowledge is simulated rather than transmitted.

And yet the final paradox remains. Even under these conditions, ideas still move. Language still circulates. Thought still sparks thought. The danger is not that nothing is learned, but that learning is severed from accountability, lineage, and care. Educational AI slop does not simply produce bad knowledge; it produces knowledge without owners, without teachers, without consequences. In this sense, the threat is not technological but civilisational. When education becomes a by-product of indifference, when understanding emerges accidentally from systems designed solely for profit, the shared foundations of trust and meaning erode. What is lost is not information, but the human relationship to knowing itself.

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Trump Veles Phenomenon

The phenomenon that later became known as 'Trump Veles' did not begin with artificial intelligence, nor did it begin with ideology. It began with money, platforms, and language treated as a mechanical resource. Long before large language models, image generators, or synthetic voices, teenagers in Veles, a small town in northern Macedonia, discovered that political language in English could be monetised without being understood. The now-famous fake news industry that flourished during the 2016 US presidential election was not a political

operation in any meaningful sense. It was an economic one. What mattered was not truth, persuasion, or even belief, but traffic, clicks, and advertising revenue.

During the final months of the 2016 election, more than a hundred pro-Trump websites were traced back to Veles, a town of roughly 45,000 people. Sensationalist headlines claiming that Hillary Clinton was about to be indicted, that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump, or that Clinton had privately praised Trump years earlier circulated at extraordinary speed on Facebook. These stories generated more engagement than the most successful articles produced by major American news organisations. The creators were teenagers and young adults with limited English proficiency and no interest in American politics. Their motivation was financial. Using Google AdSense and Facebook promotion tools, they earned sums that were unimaginable in a region where the average monthly salary hovered around a few hundred euros. Interviews conducted at the time revealed the striking amorality of the operation. The young people involved openly admitted that they did not care whether the stories were true or false, or how Americans voted. Politics was simply a profitable content category. Trump content performed better than Clinton content, not because of ideological alignment, but because Trump supporters were more likely to click, share, and react. This empirical discovery turned political discourse into a data-driven optimisation problem. The town was jokingly renamed ‘Trump Veles’, and the global media briefly fixated on the idea that a remote Balkan city had helped shape the outcome of a US presidential election.

What makes the Trump Veles phenomenon historically significant is not its scale, but its structure. It represents an early and unusually clear confirmation of what can be described as Ayolov’s principle of the economic policy of online media: that contemporary digital communication is driven less by political ideology, as suggested by classical political economy models of media, and more by attention economics detached from meaning, belief, or intention. This marks a decisive departure from Chomsky’s propaganda model, which presupposes ideological alignment, institutional power, and elite interests shaping media output. In Veles, there was no ideology to manufacture consent. There was only an algorithm to satisfy. The teenagers of Veles did not manipulate political discourse because they believed in it, but because they did not. Their indifference was their advantage. They copied and pasted content, rewrote headlines, bought fake Facebook profiles, seeded posts in groups with hundreds of thousands of members, and refined their techniques to maximise revenue per thousand impressions. Some earned in weeks what their parents could not earn in years. New cars appeared on the streets. Expensive clothes, watches, and bottles of champagne became symbols of success. The work itself was not considered a real job, but it worked. This model did not disappear after 2016. It generalised. What began as political fake news evolved into a broader system of content production optimised for monetisation rather than meaning. Health advice, celebrity gossip, conspiracy theories, and later philosophical and psychological themes all became part of the same economic logic. The Trump Veles phenomenon was not an anomaly; it was a prototype.

By 2026, the same structural logic operates across YouTube and other platforms, now amplified by AI. Teenagers in Bulgaria, Nigeria, or elsewhere can generate videos about Wittgenstein, Schopenhauer, Kristeva, Freud, feminism, father figures, or existential anxiety without understanding the concepts involved, without reading the texts, and sometimes without speaking English fluently. Large language models generate scripts, synthetic voices deliver them with academic calm, stock footage and AI-generated faces simulate authority, and the algorithm does the rest. A hundred dollars a day is no longer exceptional. The continuity with

Veles is crucial. AI did not invent this system; it industrialised it. The original Macedonian content creators already demonstrated that language functions economically even when stripped of understanding. AI simply removes the remaining friction: the need to copy, type, or even recognise words. The economic logic remains unchanged. Content is produced to satisfy platforms, not audiences in the human sense. Meaning is an accidental by-product.

The Trump Veles case also revealed something deeply unsettling about the internet as a global infrastructure. Political discourse can be weaponised from anywhere, by anyone, without proximity to the consequences. A teenager who has never been to the United States, who cannot locate Pennsylvania on a map, and who struggles to form complex sentences in English can nevertheless influence millions of voters simply by feeding the algorithm what it wants. This is not power in the traditional sense. It is leverage without responsibility. Local journalists in Macedonia warned at the time that the phenomenon could easily migrate into domestic politics. False domains registered abroad were already producing misleading content about Macedonian elections. The same tools used to exploit American outrage could be redeployed anywhere. The only requirement was attention. What distinguishes the Trump Veles phenomenon from earlier forms of propaganda is its emotional emptiness. Classical propaganda assumes belief, persuasion, and commitment. Veles introduced a model of pure amorality. The creators did not believe the stories they published, and they did not care whether their readers believed them either. What mattered was engagement. This is why the phenomenon feels so disorienting. It is not evil in a traditional sense; it is indifferent. That indifference persists in the AI-driven content economy of 2026. Philosophical lectures generated by teenagers who do not understand a word of Nietzsche are not lies in the conventional sense. They may even be accurate at the level of summary. Yet they reproduce the same structural condition first revealed in Veles: language severed from understanding, discourse detached from responsibility, meaning subordinated to monetisation.

The Trump Veles phenomenon thus marks a turning point in the history of media. It demonstrated that political communication could be outsourced globally, stripped of ideology, and reduced to a revenue stream. AI did not create this logic; it fulfilled it. The result is a media environment in which content circulates without authors, ideas move without thinkers, and influence operates without belief. What began in a small Macedonian town during the 2016 US election has become a general model. Today, the same mechanisms shape political discourse, education, philosophy, and psychology across platforms. The question is no longer whether fake news can influence democracy, but whether meaning itself can survive an economy in which language works perfectly even when no one understands what it says.

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Liberal Panic and Click Economy: The Macedonian Fake News Case

In his article 'The Fake News Mills of Macedonia and Other Liberal Panics' (2018), Andrew Graan analyses the now-canonical story of the Macedonian teenagers from Veles who flooded

Facebook with sensational pro-Trump fake news during the 2016 US presidential election. Graan's intervention is important because it refuses the dominant moralistic framing of the episode as an external assault on an otherwise rational liberal public sphere. Instead, he treats the Veles case as a moral panic that reveals more about liberal assumptions, media infrastructures, and publicity norms than about the supposed malign ingenuity of Balkan teenagers. Building on Graan's analysis, this article argues that the Macedonian case marks a deeper historical shift: the replacement of political economy as the primary explanatory framework for media power with what can be called an economic policy of online media, captured by Ayolov's Propaganda 2.1 model – a system organised around monetising anger, attention, and engagement, encapsulated in the blunt rule that angry people click more.

The original BuzzFeed article of November 2016 framed the story as a shocking revelation: teenagers in Veles, a small postsocialist town, were allegedly duping Trump supporters with fake news. Sensational headlines about Hillary Clinton's indictment or Pope Francis endorsing Donald Trump circulated widely, generating extraordinary engagement. The media response was immediate and theatrical. International news crews descended on Veles. Late-night comedy shows mocked the phenomenon. Senior political figures reportedly obsessed over the story. The narrative structure was clear: a foreign, morally suspect 'other' had exploited the porous infrastructures of Facebook and Google to infiltrate and corrupt the American public sphere. Graan carefully dissects this narrative. He shows how the figure of the Macedonian teen was cast as cunning yet amoral, echoing long-standing stereotypes about postsocialist illicit economies. At the same time, platforms such as Facebook and Google were portrayed as neutral conduits accidentally granting access to a vulnerable democratic space. Underlying this framing was a liberal model of communication that assumed a rational public sphere, populated by informed citizens whose opinions could be distorted by false information injected from outside, almost in a hypodermic manner. What this framing obscured, as Graan argues, were the structural conditions that made the Veles operation not only possible but predictable. Fake news did not violate the norms of US publicity so much as expose them. Long before Macedonian teenagers entered the scene, American political communication had already been reorganised around branding, message discipline, spectacle, and emotional mobilisation. As Lempert and Silverstein have shown, electoral politics increasingly operates through the competitive construction of candidate personae, with policy issues functioning primarily as vehicles for image. Similarly, Boyer and Yurchak have described how news media privilege semiotic packaging, speed, and theatricality over verification and plurality.

Seen from this angle, the Veles teenagers were not external saboteurs but opportunistic adapters. They recognised, empirically and without ideological commitment, what performed well within an existing media ecology. Trump-related content generated more engagement than Clinton-related content, not because of truth value but because of emotional intensity. Outrage, affirmation, and identity reinforcement travelled faster than nuance. The teenagers did not need to understand American politics or even English particularly well. They needed only to observe what triggered clicks, shares, and ad impressions. This is where Graan's analysis can be extended through the lens of Ayolov's Propaganda 2.1 model. Classical propaganda models, including Chomsky's political economy of media, presuppose ideological alignment, institutional power, and elite interests shaping discourse. Propaganda 2.1 operates differently. It is not primarily about manufacturing consent but about manufacturing engagement. Its core logic is economic policy, not political ideology. Platforms reward attention, especially emotional attention, and anger is one of the most reliable emotional accelerants. In this system,

content does not need to persuade; it needs to provoke. The Macedonian case illustrates this with brutal clarity. The teenagers of Veles were not propagandists in the traditional sense. They were economic actors responding rationally to incentive structures. They discovered that outrage-based political content was highly profitable and scaled it accordingly. The fact that their content aligned with a particular political camp was incidental. Had liberal outrage been more profitable, they would have produced that instead. This indifference to ideology is precisely what distinguishes Propaganda 2.1 from earlier models. Graan notes the irony that liberal panic focused on the foreignness of the actors rather than on the domestic media system they exploited. By locating the problem in Macedonian teenagers, American discourse externalised responsibility and avoided confronting how deeply promotional logics had already reshaped journalism, politics, and public debate. Fake news appeared as an aberration rather than as an extreme expression of normalised practices: headline optimisation, emotional framing, and the separation of commodity value from truth value.

In retrospect, the Veles episode can be read as an early prototype of a much broader transformation. What was manual, copy-paste labour in 2016 has, by 2026, become automated, scalable, and global through AI systems. Yet the underlying logic remains unchanged. Teenagers in Bulgaria, Nigeria, or elsewhere now produce videos about Wittgenstein, Schopenhauer, Freud, Kristeva, feminism, or father figures, often without understanding the content, the language, or the intellectual traditions involved. The motivation is the same as in Veles: monetisation through engagement. The audience, paradoxically, may be educated and genuinely interested. Language still works. Attention is still captured. Meaning still circulates. But the chain between understanding, authorship, and responsibility is broken. The Macedonian fake news mills therefore do not represent a uniquely illiberal pathology imported from the periphery into the liberal centre. As Graan suggests, they reveal the internal contradictions of liberal publicity itself. From the perspective of Propaganda 2.1, they also demonstrate that economic policy – the incentive structures embedded in platforms – now matters more than political economy in explaining how discourse circulates. Power no longer flows primarily from ownership of media institutions or ideological alignment, but from the ability to optimise affect within algorithmic systems.

The liberal panic of 2016 misidentified the cause of the crisis. The problem was not that foreign teenagers lied to American voters. The problem was that a media environment already organised around spectacle, branding, and emotional extraction could be so easily exploited by actors with no stake in truth, belief, or democratic outcomes. Veles was not the origin of the problem; it was the mirror in which it briefly became visible. In this sense, the Trump-Veles episode stands as an early warning. It showed that propaganda in the digital age does not require conviction, coordination, or conspiracy. It requires only attention markets, monetisation tools, and the simple behavioural fact that anger travels faster than reason. Propaganda 2.1 is not a doctrine but an infrastructure, and its logic has only intensified since 2016.

Graan, A. (2018) 'The fake news mills of Macedonia and other liberal panics', Cultural Anthropology – Fieldsights, 25 April. Available at: https://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/the-fake-news-mills-of-macedonia-and-other-liberal-panics (Accessed: 25 April 2018).

3. Signum Residuum

Fake Selves: The Rise of the Identity Industrial Complex

When the phrase ‘fake news’ entered public vocabulary in 2016, it appeared to name a new and alarming distortion of the democratic public sphere. The now-canonical story began in Veles, a small town in North Macedonia, where teenagers created hundreds of sensationalist political websites targeting American audiences. Their motivation was not ideology but advertising revenue. Using Facebook’s algorithmic amplification and Google AdSense, they discovered that outrage travelled faster than accuracy and that anger converted reliably into clicks. What looked like political interference was, in fact, an economic experiment in attention arbitrage. The age of fake news has matured into the age of fake selves. What first appeared as a problem of misleading information has revealed itself as a transformation of personhood. The Veles experiment demonstrated that belief was unnecessary for influence; performance was enough. Over the following decade the system absorbed this lesson. Content could be corrected, removed, or debunked, but identity could not. The persuasive unit of media shifted from the statement to the speaker, from the article to the persona. Authority became a style rather than a verification. The fake self thrives because it resolves a contradiction at the centre of contemporary communication. Audiences demand authenticity yet reward spectacle. The solution is a character who performs sincerity. Consistency of tone replaces consistency of conviction. The persona must feel stable even when opinions change. What matters is recognisability. Viewers return not for facts but for the reliable emotional rhythm of a familiar role. In this environment, belief becomes optional while performance becomes necessary. The consequence is not widespread deception but widespread adaptation. Individuals learn that coherence is costly and flexibility profitable. Identity becomes modular: positions can be rearranged without collapsing the brand. Public life resembles episodic narrative more than deliberation. Figures persist as recurring characters whose function is to maintain attention. The audience participates knowingly, not because it is fooled but because participation itself supplies orientation. The fake self becomes socially real. Artificial intelligence does not introduce this condition; it clarifies it. If a synthetic persona can operate indistinguishably from a human one, then authenticity was already aesthetic rather than ontological. The system rewards engagement, and engagement rewards legible characters. Under such conditions sincerity survives privately while performance governs publicly. The final effect is cultural rather than political. Truth loses primacy not because it is rejected, but because identity mediates every encounter with it. The public sphere becomes a theatre of continuity where roles persist longer than ideas. The central question is no longer whether a statement corresponds to reality, but whether the character delivering it remains compelling enough to sustain the narrative.

By 2018, as journalists and scholars noted, the term ‘fake news’ had already begun to collapse under its own weight. It came to describe everything from deliberate fabrication to political spin, conspiracy theories, reporting errors, satire, and any journalism that someone disliked. Fact-checkers warned that the phrase itself was becoming counterproductive, eroding trust rather than restoring it. Liberal panic focused on misinformation as content: false claims, misleading headlines, fabricated events. The implicit assumption was that if false statements could be identified and corrected, the problem would be contained. What this framing missed was structural. The Veles phenomenon did not represent a breakdown of the public sphere so

much as a revelation of how it already functioned. The teenagers did not invent manipulation; they industrialised it by stripping it of belief. Their activity exposed a deeper logic of online media: content circulates not because it is true, but because it performs. It generates engagement, provokes emotion, and sustains attention. In this sense, the Macedonian fake news mills were not an external attack on liberal publicity but a mirror held up to it.

Between 2018 and 2026, this logic has not weakened. It has evolved. Fact-checking, platform moderation, and public awareness have made outright fake news less profitable. False claims can now be flagged, contextualised, or removed. Yet the economic infrastructure that rewarded outrage did not disappear. It adapted. The future of disinformation, it turns out, is not primarily fake content but fake identity. Today, the dominant form of mediated persuasion is not a false article but a credible persona. Influencers, commentators, streamers, and podcast hosts operate less as journalists than as characters in an ongoing narrative. Their authority derives not from verification but from performance. Viewers no longer ask whether a statement is true in an objective sense; they ask whether the persona feels authentic, entertaining, or aligned with their emotional expectations. Identity has become the medium. This shift marks the transition from a Fake News Complex to a Fake Identity Complex. Unlike news stories, identities cannot be fact-checked in any meaningful way. One can verify whether an event occurred, but not whether a person believes what they say, whether their outrage is sincere, or whether their convictions are stable. The influencer may change opinions overnight without penalty, because what is consumed is not coherence but spectacle. Identity functions as a flexible asset, endlessly adjustable to market demand. This is where the logic of kayfabe, borrowed from professional wrestling, becomes instructive. In wrestling, audiences know that the characters, rivalries, and outcomes are scripted, yet they willingly suspend disbelief. The enjoyment lies not in factual authenticity but in emotional engagement. Heroes and villains exist to structure drama, not truth. Contemporary political and cultural media increasingly operate in the same mode. The public knows, at some level, that personas are constructed, yet continues to watch, share, and react as if the performance itself were the point. Figures such as famous influences function less as conveyors of information than as recurring characters. Their shows resemble episodic dramas more than debates. Viewers tune in not to be informed but to experience alignment, provocation, reassurance, or outrage. Whether these figures believe what they say is irrelevant. The persona performs its role; the audience responds. The relationship is affective, not epistemic.

Crucially, this system does not require artificial intelligence. AI-generated avatars may accelerate the process, but the principle predates them. Human influencers already operate as synthetic selves: carefully calibrated, monetised identities optimised for attention. AI merely removes the remaining friction. If a persona can be generated, adjusted, and multiplied algorithmically, the economic logic remains the same. Attention first; identity second; belief optional. This development confirms a shift away from classical models of political economy, including Chomsky and Herman's propaganda model, which presupposed institutional gatekeepers, ideological alignment, and elite consensus-building. The contemporary system follows a different logic: what matters is not ideology but engagement. This is what Ayolov describes as Propaganda 2.1—a model of monetised outrage in which 'angry people click more'. Influence no longer flows from top-down power structures but from the market dynamics of attention. The most visible voices are not those aligned with power, but those optimised for reaction. In this environment, identity itself becomes industrialised. Personas are produced, maintained, and discarded according to performance metrics. Opinions are modular.

Moral positions are interchangeable. What persists is not belief but brand recognition. The public sphere no longer revolves around shared facts, but around recurring characters whose consistency lies in tone, not truth. The paradox is that this system feels transparent. Audiences are not deceived in the traditional sense. They often know that what they are watching is exaggerated, selective, or performative. Yet this knowledge does not weaken its effect. On the contrary, it normalises it. Just as wrestling fans enjoy kayfabe precisely because it is staged, media consumers increasingly accept that public discourse is a form of entertainment. Politics becomes a genre; identity becomes a role. From this perspective, the panic over fake news missed the real transformation. The problem was never simply that false stories circulated online. The deeper shift was that truth ceased to be the primary currency of public communication. What replaced it was attention, emotion, and narrative continuity. Fake news could be corrected. Fake identities cannot.

The Identity Industrial Complex is therefore not a technological problem but a cultural one. It reflects a world in which authenticity is less valuable than performance, sincerity less profitable than outrage, and understanding less rewarding than visibility. In such a system, the question is no longer whether information is true, but whether the character delivering it is compelling. What emerged in Veles was not an anomaly but a prototype. What followed was not correction but refinement. And what now dominates is not misinformation but synthetic selfhood—a media environment in which everyone knows the drama is staged, yet continues to watch, react, and participate as if the performance were reality itself. In this sense, the future of propaganda is not about lies. It is about roles.

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Slop People: How Profit Turned Culture into a Factory of Personas

Duffy and Poell's article Platform Influencers and the Cultural Production of Authenticity examines how authenticity in digital culture functions less as a spontaneous personal quality and more as a structured form of labour. Influencers must continuously design intimacy, relatability, and emotional transparency according to platform expectations and audience metrics. What appears as sincerity is therefore organised through routines of optimisation, self-monitoring, and economic calculation. Personality becomes a managed asset, produced and circulated as value within platform capitalism. Cotter's article Playing the Visibility Game: How Digital Influencers and Algorithms Negotiate Influence on Instagram analyses the reciprocal shaping of identity between users and platform algorithms. Influencers learn to adjust aesthetics, posting rhythms, tone, and behaviour according to what the system rewards with visibility. Over time this produces not genuine diversity but patterned variations calibrated to algorithmic expectations. Self-expression becomes strategic optimisation, and identity turns into a negotiated output of technical incentives rather than a spontaneous personal form. Together the analyses by Duffy and Poell and by Cotter show that identity online is no longer merely expressed but operationalised as labour calibrated to platform rewards. When relatability, personality, and behaviour are continually engineered for visibility, the persona gradually detaches from conviction and becomes a repeatable production format. The figure of the "Slop Person" emerges precisely at this point: a subject shaped by optimisation loops until individuality is replaced by economically efficient recognisability.

The contemporary anxiety around ‘AI slop’ often assumes that low-quality, mass-produced content is a recent technological aberration. In reality, slop long predates artificial intelligence. What has changed is not the existence of slop, but its scale, speed, and its effects on identity. Long before algorithms and large language models, culture already produced writing, art, journalism, and scholarship designed primarily to capture attention, generate prestige, or convert curiosity into revenue. AI has not invented slop; it has merely automated and intensified an old economic logic. The deeper transformation lies elsewhere: in how people themselves are gradually reshaped by these incentives, becoming what might be called slop identities—mass-produced personas alienated from any stable sense of self. Historically, slop emerged wherever attention could be monetised. In nineteenth-century journalism, so-called yellow journalism relied on fabricated stories, invented experts, and exaggerated claims to increase circulation. The Great Moon Hoax of 1835, in which a New York newspaper published elaborate reports about a fictional lunar civilisation, dramatically boosted sales and prestige. The content was false, but the motive was simple: profit through spectacle. The audience response mattered more than truth, and credibility was a renewable resource as long as attention kept flowing. The same logic reappeared in late twentieth-century media scandals involving fabricated journalists. Reporters such as Jayson Blair or Stephen Glass invented sources and entire stories, not to advance a political cause, but to maintain visibility, career momentum, and institutional success. Even philosophy was not immune: the fictional thinker Jean-Baptiste Botul was treated as real and cited by prominent intellectuals, exposing how easily authority can be simulated when form substitutes for substance. In each case, slop was not merely bad content; it was a strategy for surviving and thriving within competitive attention economies. Academia, often imagined as a refuge from such pressures, developed its own slop ecosystems. The Sokal Affair demonstrated that jargon-laden nonsense could pass peer review if it aligned with prevailing ideological sensibilities. Later, programs like SCIgen automatically generated meaningless research papers that were accepted by conferences and publishers, revealing how institutional incentives reward volume, novelty, and compliance over understanding. These episodes were not technological accidents but structural outcomes of a publish-or-perish culture in which everyone benefits from throughput, even if knowledge itself stagnates.

What unites these cases is not deception for its own sake, but economic rationality. Slop appears wherever systems reward output without meaning, visibility without responsibility, and form without depth. Long before AI, people learned to play these systems by fabricating content, credentials, or personas. What is new today is that this logic no longer stops at texts or papers. It increasingly reshapes the people who produce them. In digital culture, identity itself has become a monetisable asset. Influencers, content creators, and even pseudo-experts often operate through carefully constructed personas optimised for engagement. These identities need not be coherent, sincere, or stable. They only need to perform. Opinions can shift overnight, outrage can be manufactured on demand, and authenticity becomes a stylistic effect rather than a moral commitment. Over time, the individual behind the persona risks becoming secondary to the role they play. This is where slop mutates from content into character. When people repeatedly create material solely for profit, detached from belief or understanding, they begin to internalise the logic of slop. Identity becomes modular. Convictions become interchangeable. Expression turns strategic. The result is not just fake news or fake papers, but fake selves—personas designed for circulation rather than meaning. These are not impostors in the traditional sense; they are economically rational actors adapting to incentive structures that reward performance over depth. AI accelerates this process, but it does not originate it. Automated tools simply make it easier to scale what humans were already doing: generating plausible

language, authoritative tones, and convincing narratives without comprehension. The real danger is not that machines produce nonsense, but that humans increasingly live within systems that encourage them to behave like machines—optimising output, mimicking credibility, and reproducing whatever generates returns. In this sense, slop is less a technological problem than an anthropological one. It reveals how economic pressures can hollow out culture from within, turning creativity into replication and identity into a function of metrics. When enough people participate in this system, slop ceases to be an exception and becomes a norm. People no longer merely produce slop; they become slop people—interchangeable, reproducible, and defined by their market performance. The history of slop shows that quality has always struggled against profit. What distinguishes the present moment is that the boundary between production and personhood has eroded. Culture is no longer just flooded with low-value content; it is populated by identities shaped in its image. The question, then, is not how to eliminate slop, but whether societies can still cultivate forms of expression—and forms of selfhood—that resist being reduced to profitable noise.

The idea of "slop people" names the final stage of a long cultural drift: the moment when low-value content is no longer simply produced by culture but reproduced as culture's dominant form of subjectivity. Earlier periods worried about bad journalism, fabricated research, or sensational entertainment. Those were failures of standards. Today the standard itself has shifted. The system no longer asks whether expression carries meaning, only whether it circulates. Under such conditions, people adapt rationally. They learn to speak in ways that travel, to feel in ways that register, and to think in formats that perform. What began as a strategy for visibility becomes a structure of personality. The danger is not insincerity but substitution. A persona optimised for engagement gradually becomes easier to inhabit than an uncertain inner life. Convictions are heavy; formats are light. The self therefore migrates toward what can be repeated. Instead of lying, one selects. Instead of reflecting, one calibrates. Over time the difference between performing and being weakens because performance supplies the only reliable feedback. The individual becomes a maintenance process: updating tone, stance, and emotion to remain legible within a fluctuating attention economy. Artificial intelligence intensifies this dynamic not by replacing humans but by revealing the logic already governing them. Machines generate plausible language without understanding; humans increasingly communicate in ways that do the same. Expression becomes probabilistic rather than experiential. When enough actors operate this way, culture ceases to distinguish depth from plausibility. Meaning survives locally, but circulation dominates globally. The figure of the slop person therefore marks a civilisational threshold. A society organised around measurable attention gradually produces individuals organised around measurable selves. The central question is no longer how to eliminate noise, but whether a form of personhood can endure that is not optimised for transmission.

Duffy, B.E. and Poell, T. (2022) 'Platform Influencers and the Cultural Production of Authenticity', Social Media + Society, 8(2).

Cotter, K. (2021) 'Playing the Visibility Game: How Digital Influencers and Algorithms Negotiate Influence on Instagram', New Media & Society, 23(2), pp. 1–19.

The Image of the Word: How Language Lost Connection With Reality?

In Steven Spielberg's Oscar speech for Schindler's List he confessed a certain guilt: the triumph of spectacle had overshadowed the intimacy of the written word, and culture had begun to exalt the image of the word rather than the word itself. This confession marks more than a cinematic dilemma. It signals a civilisational shift in which language, once rooted in the body and the world, gradually detached itself from both and began to live inside its own reflections. The modern human does not merely speak about reality; he navigates representations of representations, inhabiting an environment where words and images circulate without needing a stable object to justify them. To understand this transformation one must first ask what a word originally was and what an image originally meant.

The word began as sound. Before it was inscription, concept, grammar or literature, it was a call. A cry for help, a signal for danger, an invitation for cooperation, a rhythm for collective labour, a whisper for love, a shout for play. The word was therefore not information but relation. It did not describe the world from a distance but operated within it. A spoken sound changed behaviour immediately; it moved bodies. It belonged to the acoustic space of proximity where speaker and listener shared a common environment. The meaning of the word was verified by action, not interpretation. The image, by contrast, was imitation. From its earliest meanings it referred to likeness, copy, apparition and idea. The image already contained distance because it allowed something to appear without being physically present. Where the word called, the image showed. The image created memory and anticipation, while the word coordinated action. Yet both were still anchored to reality: the image to a visible object, the word to a shared situation. The fracture appears when representation begins to replace participation. The human mind discovered that it could store the world in symbols and manipulate these symbols independently of experience. Writing intensified this separation. The sound became a sign, the sign became a concept, and the concept became an abstract system. Gradually the map replaced the territory. Instead of orienting ourselves through direct encounter, we oriented ourselves through descriptions. The world turned into a readable environment before it was a lived one.

This gap was initially productive. Abstraction allowed planning, law, science and complex cooperation. But abstraction also introduced a paradox: the symbol could survive the disappearance of the object. Once a word exists independently, it can circulate without verification. A person may speak of justice without practicing it, of community without belonging to it, of experience without having lived it. Language gained autonomy. The cost of that autonomy was reality. The modern era amplified this autonomy by multiplying representations. Printing multiplied texts, photography multiplied appearances, cinema multiplied perspectives, and digital media multiplied everything simultaneously. Each stage weakened the requirement that words refer to something tangible. The sign increasingly referred to another sign. Meaning became internal to the system of language itself. The world became optional. At this point the image returns, but not as imitation of reality. It returns as replacement. The image no longer depicts an object; it produces the expectation of one. The visual spectacle precedes experience and defines it in advance. A place is known before being visited, an event before occurring, a person before meeting them. The representation becomes more real than reality because it structures anticipation. Experience merely confirms what has already been seen.

Human beings now inhabit visual space more than acoustic space. The acoustic demands participation: one must listen, wait, respond. The visual allows consumption: one can observe

without commitment. The acoustic binds people into a shared present; the visual distributes them across isolated perspectives. When culture becomes primarily visual, communication shifts from coordination to display. The purpose of language changes accordingly. Words are no longer tools for collective action but captions for images. This transformation alters truth itself. When words are anchored to action, truth is practical: it works or it fails. When words are anchored to images, truth becomes interpretative: it persuades or it disappoints. The measure of language moves from correspondence to effect. Statements are evaluated not by their relation to reality but by their ability to guide perception. Language becomes framing. Framing is inevitable because every description selects one aspect and excludes another. To call a person careful or stingy describes identical behaviour but produces opposite moral judgments. The world has not changed; the orientation toward it has. Language directs attention. What is named becomes visible; what is unnamed disappears. Thus words guide choices not by commanding action but by structuring perception. Influence operates through selection. Once this mechanism becomes conscious, language becomes strategic. Public discourse begins to operate less as exchange of understanding and more as competition of interpretations. Each description seeks dominance over alternative descriptions. Reality fragments into parallel narratives because shared reference points dissolve. Individuals inhabit worlds constructed by the vocabulary they adopt. Agreement becomes difficult not because facts differ but because frameworks differ.

The digital environment radicalises this condition. Instead of a single shared narrative space, there are countless overlapping symbolic environments. Each environment maintains coherence internally while remaining incompatible externally. The word no longer connects people to the world but connects groups to themselves. Communication produces identity rather than understanding. As words detach from shared experience, truth becomes negotiable. If meaning depends on interpretation, then persuasion replaces verification. Statements function less as reports and more as signals of belonging. To accept a description is to accept a community. Language becomes social positioning. The object of discourse is secondary to the relationship established by agreeing or disagreeing. The psychological consequence is multiplicity of realities. Individuals perceive the same situation differently because their interpretive systems differ. The external world remains one, but lived worlds become many. This produces both freedom and confusion: freedom because alternative meanings are possible, confusion because common ground shrinks. Without common ground, dialogue transforms into performance. At the same time technology distances humans from the material environment. Tools mediate experience to such a degree that direct sensory engagement decreases. The world appears as discrete objects available for manipulation rather than as an interconnected process requiring adaptation. Language reflects this fragmentation by categorising rather than relating. The environment becomes inventory. The culmination is hyperreality: a condition where representations operate independently and determine expectations. The image of the word replaces the object, and the object becomes secondary evidence for the image. The symbol does not describe the world; the world adjusts to the symbol. Life becomes rehearsal of pre-existing narratives.

Who is responsible for this transformation? Not a single institution but a distributed human preference. The image is efficient; the word is demanding. The image offers immediate certainty; the word requires interpretation within context. Societies gradually favour the faster medium. As attention becomes scarce, representation competes for impact. Spectacle triumphs over dialogue because it consumes less effort. Yet the word retains a latent power. Because it originated as sound, it can still re-establish relation. Conversation differs from display because

it requires reciprocity. To speak and listen is to acknowledge shared presence. The recovery of language's connection with reality therefore depends not on abandoning images but on restoring participation. Words regain meaning when they again coordinate action rather than merely organise perception. The crisis of language is thus not linguistic but existential. Humans have constructed symbolic systems so effective that they no longer need the world they once described. But without resistance from reality, symbols drift. The task is not to eliminate representation but to re-anchor it. When speech again implies responsibility, when description implies involvement, when naming implies care, the distance between sign and world narrows. The image of the word replaced the word because representation became easier than relation. Reversing this condition requires rediscovering language as encounter rather than information. The word must again become a call, not a caption. Only then can language recover its original function: not to mirror reality, but to live within it.

Spielberg, S. (1994) Academy Awards acceptance speech for Schindler's List, 66th Academy Awards, Los Angeles, 21 March 1994.

From Self-Expression to the Industrial Production of Persona!

There was a time when expression meant release. A person spoke, wrote, dressed, or acted in order to externalise an inner state. Expression was centrifugal: it moved outward from a centre presumed to exist prior to communication. Even performance retained this logic. The mask revealed something precisely because it concealed something else. The audience believed that behind the gesture stood a stable individual whose interior life preceded appearance. Identity therefore belonged to time; it accumulated through memory, continuity and shared experience. The contemporary persona does not originate in that interiority. It originates in visibility. Instead of revealing a pre-existing self, communication now assembles a self that would otherwise not exist. The individual is not expressed but produced. What once appeared as personality becomes interface. The shift is subtle yet decisive: the question is no longer 'Who am I?' but 'How do I appear?' The answer must be continuously updated because appearance functions inside an environment that rewards novelty over consistency.

This transformation follows the logic of mediation. Communication platforms operate less as channels than as environments of selection. They do not merely transmit identity but organise its conditions of possibility. Each environment privileges certain gestures, rhythms and intensities. Short statements replace sustained argument, emotional immediacy replaces reflection, recognisable patterns replace ambiguity. The self adapts. Gradually the individual learns not to communicate experience but to produce communicable fragments. Self-expression therefore becomes presentation. The difference lies in intentionality. Expression assumes authenticity precedes representation; presentation assumes perception precedes authenticity. The person anticipates the gaze and adjusts accordingly. Behaviour is chosen not because it corresponds to inner necessity but because it sustains recognition. The self becomes anticipatory. Instead of living and then narrating, one narrates in order to live. Within this environment identity acquires measurable form. Approval becomes visible in numbers. Attention is counted, compared and accumulated. The individual encounters a new kind of property: persona capital. Reputation ceases to be symbolic and becomes convertible. Visibility opens access to opportunities, opportunities demand further visibility, and the cycle stabilises. Recognition functions as currency because it predicts influence. The person is evaluated not by what they do but by how many can be persuaded that they exist. Quantification changes

experience. A reaction once perceived qualitatively—respect, interest, affection—appears as an increment. Meaning shifts from interpretation to measurement. When response declines, the subject interprets it not as disagreement but as disappearance. The anxiety is ontological: to be unseen is to be absent. The imperative becomes constant maintenance. Presence must be refreshed before it expires.

This maintenance requires labour. The individual monitors gestures, edits images, rehearses opinions and times publication. Spontaneity is simulated through preparation. The routine resembles work because it follows evaluation cycles. One observes performance metrics, adjusts strategy and produces new material. The self becomes a project under continuous revision. Rest threatens obsolescence. Industrial mediation intensifies this process. Platforms correlate behaviour with prediction. They identify which expressions attract attention and encourage repetition. The user gradually internalises the criteria of visibility. Instead of asking what to say, one asks what works. Creativity narrows into optimisation. Expression becomes a technical problem solved through iteration. The individual begins to relate to themselves as product. Every experience is assessed for communicative potential. A meal is photographed, a thought is condensed, an encounter is framed. Life is lived twice: first as occurrence, second as material. The second often precedes the first because anticipation determines selection. Events are chosen for their transmissibility. The person curates existence in advance. The result is fragmentation. Different contexts require different performances. Professional networks demand competence, social networks demand intimacy, entertainment spaces demand humour or outrage. Identity divides into layers adapted to each environment. Continuity becomes secondary to relevance. One is not contradictory but modular. Consistency would limit adaptability. Yet the persona exceeds even these layers. Data accumulates beyond intention. Behavioural traces form patterns inaccessible to the subject but legible to systems. Preferences, rhythms and reactions reconstruct an additional identity: the calculated self. This shadow persona predicts actions before they occur. It influences opportunities presented to the individual and thus shapes future behaviour. One becomes partly authored by statistical expectation.

Aspiration accelerates the cycle. Cultural models of success are visible everywhere and appear reproducible. Individuals imitate recognisable styles hoping to trigger recognition. Filters, formats and trends promise entry into prominence. Stardom becomes procedural rather than exceptional. The gap between ordinary and famous narrows symbolically even as it widens materially. Everyone competes within the same architecture. Maintenance therefore becomes permanent occupation. The self must remain active to remain existent. Silence risks erasure because attention migrates instantly. The subject checks responses repeatedly, interpreting fluctuations as feedback about identity itself. The emotional consequence is oscillation between validation and uncertainty. Stability contradicts the system’s tempo. The personal becomes professional. Private moments are selected for public compatibility. One edits memory before it forms. Future employers, collaborators and audiences are imagined simultaneously. The individual performs for unknown observers whose judgments may occur indefinitely later. Time compresses: the present is evaluated by hypothetical futures. Identity becomes liquid. Past expressions must not constrain future adaptation. Statements are retractable, styles replaceable, affiliations adjustable. Continuity is replaced by responsiveness. The person survives by detaching from previous versions of themselves. Memory weakens because persistence inhibits change. The biography dissolves into updates. Automation extends the process further. Artificial personas simulate human interaction to produce trust efficiently. These constructed

identities follow behavioural scripts optimised for empathy. Their effectiveness reveals something unsettling: recognition does not require a human centre. The persona functions independently of the person. What matters is coherence, not consciousness. The human participant gradually learns from these models. Emotional cues are refined, reactions timed, expressions simplified for clarity. Communication becomes modular behaviour transferable between humans and machines. The difference between authentic and artificial narrows not because machines gain depth but because humans adopt predictability.

The industrial production of persona therefore reverses the original direction of expression. Instead of inner life generating communication, communication generates inner life. Individuals interpret themselves through the responses they receive. A loop forms: projection, measurement, adjustment, projection again. Identity is stabilised only through continuous circulation. This loop restructures social relations. Interaction shifts from encounter to alignment. People evaluate each other through visible metrics and curated narratives. Trust attaches to recognisability rather than familiarity. Communities organise around shared styles of presentation more than shared experience. Belonging depends on compatibility of display. The cost is subtle alienation. The subject experiences themselves as both actor and spectator. One lives while simultaneously monitoring how living appears. Reflection does not follow action but accompanies it. Presence divides. The question ‘What am I doing?’ merges with ‘How does this look?’ until distinction fades. Yet the system persists because it satisfies genuine desires. Humans seek acknowledgement, and the industrial persona guarantees measurable recognition. It promises fairness through visibility: anyone may participate. The paradox is that universal participation intensifies competition. Distinction becomes scarce and must be manufactured continually. Thus self-expression has not vanished but changed function. It serves as raw material for persona production. Emotions become signals, opinions become markers, experiences become resources. Authenticity survives only as style—an effect carefully arranged to appear unarranged. The individual is both manufacturer and merchandise.

The transformation is neither entirely imposed nor entirely chosen. It emerges from the interaction between technological mediation and human sociality. Communication has always shaped identity; the difference now lies in scale, speed and permanence. The persona persists beyond the moment of interaction and circulates independently of its originator. To live within this condition requires awareness. The persona can be used without being mistaken for the self. But such distance is difficult because the system rewards immersion. The more completely one becomes the role, the more successfully it functions. The temptation is to merge entirely with the projection. From self-expression to industrial persona production is therefore not simply a cultural trend but a structural shift in the ontology of the self. The individual becomes a process sustained through feedback. Identity is no longer discovered but maintained. What once unfolded through time is now updated through attention. The human face remains, but it operates increasingly as a surface where recognition is manufactured rather than revealed.

Hnit, H. and Almanna, A. (2025). Constructing identity through narratives: Personal, social, and digital dimensions. Social Sciences & Humanities Open, 12, p.101692. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101692.

4. Post Secundum Ortum

The Normative Age: How Culture Became Code

Olivier Roy, in The Crisis of Culture (2020), frames the present moment as a crisis that no longer turns primarily on wages, production, or the distribution of material goods, but on the symbolic infrastructure of belonging: values, identity, the legitimacy of norms, and the ownership of culture itself. What looks, on the surface, like a sprawling list of quarrels—feminism and masculinity, racism and intersectionality, gender and biological sex, identity and universalism, appropriation, 'wokeism', cancellation, censorship, the purging of artworks, immigration—begins to cohere once culture is treated not as decoration but as social glue. Culture names the codes and symbols through which people recognise one another, transmit authority, and stabilise the boundaries of what counts as a person, a citizen, a neighbour, a victim, an offender, an insider. When those codes are disputed, the conflict is not simply over opinions; it becomes a struggle over the grammar of social life. The dramatic tone of contemporary disputes is therefore not accidental. When the symbolic order feels unstable, ordinary disagreements become moralised, then judicialised, then policed. Language itself turns accusatory. The public sphere begins to behave like a permanent tribunal, where identity functions as both evidence and verdict, and where every utterance is scanned for harm, implication, subtext, and proximity to an offence that can be named. The result is a paradox: societies that describe themselves as liberal, and that have expanded personal freedoms across sexuality, art, speech, and lifestyle over half a century, simultaneously produce an expansion of normativity so extensive that it reaches into intimacy and psychological interiority, converting private life into a field of regulation. The moral vocabulary multiplies, but so does the administrative appetite to codify and sanction. Freedom grows in the register of declared rights while shrinking in the register of lived spontaneity. This tension defines the crisis. It is not merely a clash between two cultures; it is a transformation in the very meaning of culture, and in the way norms operate once culture is reconfigured as code.

One way to interpret the moment is to imagine a transition between two cultural models, as if history were once again running its familiar script: the old order collapses, a new order rises, and the pain of transition is the price of transformation. This reading tempts both camps in the war of values. Those who feel dispossessed by the new moral language interpret change as decadence, as the end of a world, and sometimes as the end of the world. Those who feel oppressed by inherited patterns interpret change as emancipation, a long-delayed correction, a new horizon. Both are vulnerable to a pedagogical fantasy: the belief that culture can be repaired or installed by instruction, purification, and discipline, either to preserve the past or to accelerate the future. Yet the crisis does not behave like earlier transitions. It is not yielding a new shared imaginary with the force of a civilisational project. Instead, the public mood is defensive. Everyone seems to speak as a threatened minority, even those who hold institutional power. Everyone demands protection, boundaries, safe spaces, secured borders, enclosed networks, gated communities, monitored speech. In such a climate, the great universalist utopias look exhausted. Where they survive, they tend to appear in desperate, radical, and often violent forms, as if the vacuum of shared purpose can only be filled by apocalyptic intensity. Even the language of salvation, whether secular or religious, contracts into individual survival. Collective redemption becomes a private technique. Climate politics, too, often appears less as a utopian project than as an attempt to delay catastrophe, a management of the end rather than a vision of the beginning. In this void, norms become the substitute for hope. When people can

no longer imagine a common future, they attempt to manage the present by regulating it ever more finely. The world is not re-enchanted by a new culture; it is administered by proliferating rules.

This is the point where the notion of ‘coding’ becomes decisive. Culture, in its anthropological sense, is thick, implicit, and porous. It does not operate by explicit instructions alone; it lives in the shared habits of interpretation, the ability to read nuance, the tacit knowledge that allows humour, irony, forgiveness, and silence to have social meaning. High culture, as canon, is explicit in a different way: it selects and transmits works judged to have value, but its value depends on an encounter that cannot be reduced to compliance. Both senses of culture presuppose depth: a remainder that is not exhausted by explicit statements. Coding, by contrast, aims for the elimination of remainder. It tries to make communication unequivocal and linear, to ensure that the meaning of an act can be extracted, judged, and scored. In coded environments, behaviour is calibrated against objectives that are themselves vague—‘excellence’, ‘inclusion’, ‘safety’, ‘respect’, ‘harm reduction’—yet their vagueness does not weaken normativity; it strengthens it. Precisely because the goal is imprecise, measurement spreads. People compensate for conceptual ambiguity with procedural detail. A life that once relied on shared interpretive flexibility becomes a life managed by checklists. The drive is not towards the good in an ethical sense, but towards good scores. Conformism becomes a rational strategy, not necessarily because people believe in the norms, but because existence within systems increasingly depends on compliance that can be demonstrated. The person is required not only to be but to show, not only to mean but to prove, not only to act but to document. The moral order becomes bureaucratic, and bureaucracy becomes moral.

To understand why this intensifies after a period of proclaimed liberation, it helps to see the last half-century not as a single cause producing predictable effects, but as the convergence of several ruptures whose affinities reinforce one another. The transformation of values in the 1960s elevated the desiring individual to a central moral figure. Autonomy was redefined less as rational self-legislation and more as the legitimacy of pleasure, self-fulfilment, bodily sovereignty, and expressive identity. Sexuality, once framed as constraint or sin in older moral economies, became a privileged path to authenticity. This reversal did not remain a subcultural revolt; it became mainstream law, mores, and expectation. The new cultural paradigm prevailed not mainly through political conquest but through the reconfiguration of civil society. And yet, a paradox emerged from within that paradigm: liberation can turn into domination when freedom is interpreted as permission for the strong. When the rhetoric of desire masks coercion, the demand for freedom produces a counter-demand for norms that protect the vulnerable. In that sense, many contemporary moral campaigns do not represent a return to older conservatisms; they are internal corrections, attempts to reduce the contradictions of the liberation project by tightening the rules of consent, conduct, and speech. The desire to expand autonomy produces a new attention to boundaries, and boundaries, once they become a public obsession, invite regulation. The language of emancipation becomes inseparable from the language of scrutiny.

Roy, O. (2020) The Crisis of Culture: Identity Politics and the Empire of Norms. London: Hurst & Company.

From Self to Score: The Marketisation of Meaning and the Coding of Culture

The expansion of a neoliberal market logic intensifies commodification in ways that alter the moral ecology. When exchange value invades domains formerly structured by meaning, the private sphere becomes an economic surface. Life turns into a set of tokens: experiences, emotions, exposures, grievances, identities. To commodify a feeling or an injury, it must be rendered legible, comparable, and measurable. A market requires standardisation, and standardisation requires norms. The more the private becomes monetisable, the more it becomes regulated, because commodified intimacy needs rules for valuation and compensation. A society that translates suffering into claims must create procedures for proving suffering. A society that treats identity as a resource must create protocols for verifying identity. Thus moral language becomes inseparable from adjudication. Everyday life is drawn into legalistic sensibilities, because in a tokenised world, what cannot be demonstrated cannot be recognised. The paradox returns: the market celebrates individual freedom, yet the market's expansion into intimacy produces a surveillance of the self. People become administrators of their own compliance, anxious auditors of their own speech, anticipatory censors of their own impulses, because their social and economic viability depends on avoiding sanction. The individual is liberated from tradition only to be tethered to metrics.

The internet revolution accelerates this dynamic by transforming social relations into continuous communication within systems that favour explication and literalisation. Online life reduces the need for mediation by place, family, work, and local institutions. It offers an accessible, global space where affiliation can be constructed through explicit markers rather than through the slow entanglement of shared life. This is often celebrated as pluralism, yet it has a hidden cost: it weakens the thick contexts that make interpretation possible. In a mediated world, people learn to read one another across contradictions, to tolerate ambiguity, to let missteps pass, to rely on tone, history, and embodied presence. In a disembodied world, meaning is extracted from fragments, and fragments are easier to prosecute than to interpret. The internet tends toward profile rather than portrait: the person becomes a list of traits, preferences, affiliations, statements, and signals that can be aggregated, predicted, and categorised. A profile is not simply a representation; it is an instrument designed for sorting. Sorting invites scoring. Scoring invites behavioural calibration. The social field begins to resemble a continuous assessment environment where visibility is mandatory and misunderstanding becomes evidence. Irony, humour, and nuance survive only if they are labelled, but labelling transforms them into literals. Once communication is forced to declare its intent explicitly, the implicit dimension of culture thins. People lose the shared skill of 'reading' one another and replace it with rule-following and accusation. Polarisation then becomes less a clash of substantive visions than a function of incompatible codes.

This produces a deeper shift: the internet does not simply host culture; it reorganises culture into replicable formats that detach practices from their originating contexts. Where earlier cultural diffusion often meant acculturation to a dominant canon, contemporary diffusion often looks like the spread of modular codes: templates, memes, gestures, slogans, consumable identities. They replicate because they are easy to copy, not because they are deeply understood. They travel because they are legible across contexts, not because they carry a thick world with them. This is why contemporary globalisation cannot be described simply as Westernisation or as a clash between stable civilisations. The very idea that the world consists of coherent cultural blocs presupposes cultures that still hold together as interpretive communities with shared implicit meanings. Yet the conflict over values arises precisely when deculturation spreads.

Cultures hollow out while their markers harden. People defend identity through simplified signs: food, clothing, rituals, slogans, and symbolic prohibitions. The real content of cultural life—its internal plurality, its lived contradictions, its capacity for transformation—shrinks, while the performative boundary grows louder. In such a setting, multiculturalism and assimilationism become mirror images: both imagine cultures as fixed packages that must either coexist or be absorbed. But the actual condition is stranger. What spreads most successfully is not a canon and not a thick anthropological world, but coded subcultures that function like plug-ins. They supply belonging without requiring depth. They enable recognition without requiring shared life.

The crisis of the nation-state and the deterritorialisation of labour and movement intensify the problem because they erode the older sites where social contracts were negotiated and where shared meaning could stabilise. When production, community, and politics were more tightly territorialised, class, work, and civic institutions created durable contexts for identity. Deterritorialisation breaks these contexts. Work becomes precarious, mobile, isolated; collective life fragments; time itself loses the rhythm of shared leisure and common institutions. The social bond thins, and when the bond thins, people search for substitute forms of security. Identity becomes one such substitute, and normativity becomes another. The more unstable the material and institutional landscape, the more people demand symbolic certainty. They want clearer boundaries, firmer definitions, and enforceable protections. The state, weakened in its ability to shape the economy, often compensates by becoming strong in a different register: policing symbols, speech, behaviour, and belonging. The public sphere becomes a moral theatre because it is easier to regulate discourse than to regulate global capital. In this sense, the empire of norms can expand precisely when traditional sovereignty contracts.

The result is a crisis not just of culture but of the concept of culture. Culture used to name a shared background that could not be fully articulated, and high culture used to name a canon whose authority could be contested but whose depth resisted reduction to compliance. In the current condition, culture is transformed into a battlefield of explicit codes, and the coded form destroys what culture once did: it converts implicit meaning into procedural rules, living interpretation into enforceable statements, shared ambiguity into measurable compliance. When this happens, utopia collapses and administration replaces imagination. People do not so much inherit a world as manage it. They do not so much belong as qualify. Identity becomes a credential, and morality becomes a set of protocols. The crisis, then, is not solved by choosing between universalism and identity, between tradition and progress, between old canon and new sensitivities. The deeper question is whether a society can recover a form of culture that is neither authoritarian inheritance nor bureaucratic code: a shared world thick enough to permit interpretation, disagreement, humour, and mercy without turning every interaction into a trial. If culture is reduced to norms, it becomes incapable of generating meaning; it can only produce compliance. And if meaning is what binds people beyond fear, then an empire of norms may stabilise behaviour while dissolving the very social ties it claims to protect.

The Crisis of Imaginaries: When Culture Stops Dreaming and Starts Cataloguing

Olivier Roy, in The Crisis of Culture (2020), describes a civilisational shift in which cultures lose the shared imaginaries that once made meaning believable, transmissible, and socially

binding. An imaginary is not an optional ornament that people add to life after material needs are met; it is the medium in which a society recognises itself, narrates its continuity, and makes obligations feel legitimate rather than merely imposed. It is not only a collection of images but a structure of belief that allows meanings to take root and circulate without constant policing. When an imaginary weakens, society does not simply become more rational. It becomes more anxious, more procedural, and more hungry for substitutes, because the need to dream does not disappear when shared dreams collapse. It merely migrates into other forms, often thinner, more commercial, and more aggressively codified. The distinctive feature of the present crisis is therefore not merely conflict over values but the erosion of the symbolic conditions that allow values to be lived as a common world. What replaces that common world is a patchwork of subcultural worlds, administrative norms, and purchasable fictions, with the imagination preserved only in deculturated form, like a flame carried in a plastic container.

Any culture requires a believable background, a sense that the words people use refer to something stable enough to be shared. Belief is not only religious. It is the tacit confidence that symbols point beyond themselves, that institutions can transmit meaning, that inherited words can still hold. When the background dissolves, speech changes its texture. It becomes performative rather than referential, expressive rather than descriptive, therapeutic rather than communal. The most striking symptom is that language begins to lose its anchoring function and instead becomes a stage for intensity. Sense is replaced by voice, argument by affect, continuity by eruption. In such moments, people do not simply ‘believe less’; they believe differently, and often in ways that no longer require a thick tradition, a shared grammar, or even a coherent doctrine. Belief becomes mobile, private, and sometimes deliberately inarticulate, because what binds is not a statement but a feeling of being moved. The strange prestige of ecstatic expression, the attraction of pure utterance, the desire to bypass reference and speak directly from the wound, can be understood as an attempt to preserve the intensity of belief after its cultural anchoring has failed. When the common imaginary collapses, the subject reappears as pathos.

This helps explain why neither high culture nor everyday anthropological culture provides the stuff of dreams in the way it once did. The modern collapse of grand ideologies did not simply liberate individuals from false totalities; it also weakened the collective imagination that those totalities supplied, for better and worse. The political order, when it loses sacred or metaphysical foundations, often falls back on procedural legitimacy, on a theory of the social contract that feels abstract compared with lived experience. Secularism, which once presented itself as a kind of moral elevation and intellectual spirituality, can degrade into a code of exclusion, defining itself not by what it offers but by what it bans. In that vacuum, imaginaries drift to the margins. They survive in fandoms, sects, conspiratorial communities, and performative micro-worlds where belonging is intense precisely because it is threatened, and where the sacred returns as radical narrative. The future becomes difficult to imagine positively, because the shared image of a common horizon has frayed. Even youth mobilisation, which once carried the tone of hope, becomes organised by fear, as if the strongest collective story available is catastrophe management rather than world-building. A generation raised amid ecological dread learns to dream backwards, longing for an Earth imagined as ‘before’ human disruption, a nostalgia that carries the structure of a utopia but without its confidence.

Yet imagination does not vanish; it is rehomed by the culture industry. New imaginary spaces proliferate as detachable universes: fantasy franchises, manga worlds, superhero mythologies, and transmedia sagas that can be entered without initiation into any local tradition. These worlds

work through collage. They assemble cultural fragments removed from their contexts and recombine them into portable myths: antiquity spliced with futuristic technology, medieval emblems merged with martial arts, feudal castles placed inside cosmic wars. This collage is not merely aesthetic; it is the form that globalised imagination takes when it must travel without a shared background. A world designed for global circulation cannot rely on implicit cultural knowledge that is locally transmitted; it must be readable by anyone. It therefore becomes, by necessity, kitsch in a structural sense: recognisable motifs without the depth of their original worlds, effects without roots, symbols without obligations. The attraction is not authenticity but accessibility.

What deepens the transformation is that youth culture no longer remains a phase. It becomes a style of life extended across the lifespan. The cult of youth is not simply admiration for the young; it is the preservation of one's own youth as a value in itself. This can be read in delayed parenthood, in the marketing of athletic seniors, and in the normalisation of games as adult practices: role play, reenactments, competitive leisure, and immersive digital worlds. Games are the purest expression of the new cultural logic because they condense codes, norms, and deculturation into one form. A game is explicit. It operates through a finite number of elements. It is normative, because it is defined by rules and sanctions. And it is deculturated, because it can incorporate symbols from anywhere without requiring the cultural world those symbols once belonged to. Everything relevant is specified by the system; the implicit is excluded by design. A person cannot appeal to a hidden tradition to reinterpret the rules. One cannot claim a tacit understanding. The rule is the world. The game is complete because it has no context, only a sequence with a start, a logic, an end. That completeness is seductive in an age where culture has lost its shared background, because it offers a stable, manageable microcosm.

This logic spreads beyond leisure. When social theory treats people as rational players in abstract situations, it implies that action is rule-governed and culturally neutral, as if meaning were reducible to strategies rather than embedded in worlds. In parallel, fiction itself becomes less a deep narrative inheritance and more an assembly of detachable sequences. The triumph of fantasy and the collapse of chronology signal a deeper disorientation: history stops functioning as an explanatory continuity and becomes a storehouse of reusable motifs. The past is mined for aesthetic fragments, not inhabited as a chain of meaning. The future is not projected as a new world but replayed as a variation on an eternal present. When popular narratives loop through time travel and recursive catastrophe, they express a cultural mood in which the future is not open but haunted, and in which the present keeps returning to itself, as if unable to imagine a genuine departure.

Decontextualisation as the Engine of Crisis

Cultural elements have always travelled, been borrowed, transformed, and integrated, but what is new is the weakening of acculturation, the slow integration into another living culture. Instead, fragments circulate as fragments, often unaltered, forming a virtual space that is untethered to real societies. Objects become ready-made symbols, stripped of function, floating in a marketplace of references. The contemporary environment intensifies this through an infinite reservoir of extractable material: images, rhythms, cuisines, fashions, historical scenes, slogans, gestures. The abundance is not itself the problem. The problem is that abundance makes context optional. One can build an identity, a taste, a worldview, by selecting and recombining fragments like Lego. This looks like freedom, and it is experienced as self-

expression, yet it subtly erodes the conditions of culture, because culture requires more than selection. It requires embeddedness, the experience of meaning that cannot be reduced to a menu.

Music offers a clear illustration. When everything is preserved, catalogued, and made available, the listener gains access but loses orientation. The archive becomes total, and the reference points that once guided taste weaken. All forms appear on the same plane, and the experience becomes disincarnate. The trace circulates without the life that produced it. Yet this loss is not felt primarily as deprivation; it is felt as liberation, because the fragment can be reattached to new pleasures without obligation to its origins. The meme is the emblem of this: an image severed from its production conditions, then reinserted into new contexts to generate new meanings. It is a three-step machine of decontextualisation, suppression of origins, and recontextualisation. In other words, the logic of contemporary culture is not creation from nothing but recomposition from fragments. Cuisine makes the same movement visible. Fusion food treats traditions as ingredient libraries, and alongside this appears a new codification that breaks food into measurable categories: allergens, calories, macro-nutrients, lifestyle labels, moral signals. The paradox is that the multiplication of references often hides a uniformisation of taste, while the language surrounding taste inflates. Discourse replaces experience. A menu ceases to describe and begins to prescribe, telling diners what they are supposed to perceive. Food becomes something to photograph, narrate, and share, a performance of taste rather than a sensory event. The moral atmosphere returns here too, as codes of purity and harm proliferate, while the marketplace rewards hyper-description. The very act of eating becomes an interpretive ritual governed by norms.

The same distancing occurs in tourism, where culture is consumed as a checklist. The visitor ‘does’ monuments the way one completes obligations, and the meaning of the object is flattened into a token of having been there. Religion, too, can be broken into practices that are catalogued according to emotional effect, treated like a repertoire of techniques for wellbeing. The sacred becomes a spreadsheet. Once practices are detached from their worlds, they can be deployed instrumentally, and instrumentality invites standardisation. Resistance to deculturation often reproduces deculturation. Conservatives and multiculturalists alike seek to preserve heritage through markers, but markers are precisely what survive when culture weakens. The defended heritage becomes museumified or folklorised, and the legal imagination rushes in: censorship, norms, protection, the policing of symbols. Both camps tend to respond to cultural fragility by expanding regulation, as if rules could restore meaning. Yet rules cannot generate dreams. They can only restrict them. This is why the contemporary culture war is also a struggle over normative power: who controls the markers, who decides what they mean, who owns them, who may use them, who must be sanctioned for misuse.

The concept of ‘folkloremes’ captures the end point: cultural practices and objects segmented into autonomous units designed to circulate in a global space, sanitised and calibrated because they must be legible, exportable, and non-threatening. Such inventories do not present societies as total social facts. They present culture as an index of separable items. That separability invites property claims. When cultural fragments float, they can be appropriated, and appropriation triggers moral outrage precisely because it reveals the emptiness beneath the marker. If a dish, a hairstyle, a garment, or a dance is treated as the emblem of a group, then the borrowing of that emblem feels like theft of identity. The fight becomes less about art or taste and more about recognition, hierarchy, and historical injury. Copyright logic enters culture not as an economic detail but as a metaphysical substitute: the group attempts to secure its existence by owning its

signs. Yet once a sign is owned, it is further detached from lived culture, becoming a trademark that stands in for what is missing. The struggle over markers is therefore a symptom of a deeper absence: the inability to rely on a shared imaginary that would make belonging thicker than a logo. This absence also distorts political projects that claim to defend a civilisation. When universality becomes suspect, defenders of a tradition increasingly treat their own culture as just another particular identity to be protected against outsiders. The claim to universality is abandoned, and what remains is a repertory of emblems: foods, monuments, local languages revived as signage, commemorations staged as theatre. Memory becomes a moral weapon, organised through selective sequences extracted from history to define who counts as good and who must be condemned. 'Cancel culture' in this sense is not the invention of forgetting but the intensification of axiological management of the past. The past is constantly summoned to judge the present, because culture no longer supplies a stable horizon; it supplies a courtroom.

The phrase 'way of life' exposes the bottom rung of this transformation. When political entities cannot agree on culture as meaning, they retreat to culture as lifestyle: food, dress, habits, quiet hours, a statistical average of conformity. This is not merely banal language. It is the political admission that culture no longer functions as a shared imaginary capable of producing dreams. Liberalism, in its own self-conception, treats its principles as universal and therefore not cultural; culture and religion become private matters to be enjoyed individually, provided they do not govern publicly. As a result, the political realm claims to be cultureless while culture is reduced to harmless consumption. What remains is platitude with policing power: a thin list of behaviours presented as identity. It is a form of culture that cannot inspire, only regulate, and it is therefore perfectly fitted to an age in which administration replaces imagination. When culture becomes a repertoire and a rulebook, society can still function, but it cannot dream together, and without shared dreaming, the future becomes either a management problem or a catastrophe to be delayed.

5. Archivum Sine Origine

The World Without Subtext: How Coding Replaced Understanding

Olivier Roy, in Holy Ignorance, analyses a transformation in communication in which culture ceases to provide implicit meaning and is replaced by explicit codes designed to function everywhere without interpretation. Communication once relied on a shared background: people did not need to explain every intention because gestures, tone, silence and allusion were already intelligible within a common world. The self-evident existed not as dogma but as familiarity. When that familiarity dissolves, language changes its nature. Words are no longer surrounded by context but must carry their full meaning alone. Communication becomes literal not because people prefer precision but because the shared environment that made ambiguity safe has weakened. The disappearance of the implicit is therefore not only a linguistic shift; it marks the erosion of culture as a medium of understanding.

Coding replaces culture precisely by eliminating uncertainty. The coded message must be unambiguous, detached from reference, and valid for anyone regardless of origin. Such communication cannot tolerate irony, double meaning or tacit knowledge, because interpretation would reintroduce difference. The result is a universal normativity: once meaning depends on explicit clarity, deviation becomes noise. A message unclear to the receiver is

treated as an error rather than a misunderstanding. Communication thus moves from dialogue toward calibration. The purpose is not mutual discovery but mutual certainty. The coded environment also demands the homogenisation of what circulates within it. Taste, emotion, behaviour and even the body are gradually formatted so they can be communicated without cultural translation. Earlier anthropological distinctions between indirect and direct communication described differences between societies, yet the contemporary development exceeds that contrast. What appears as a difference between cultures becomes a general condition affecting them all. Global exchange does not preserve context-rich communication; it gradually compresses communication into explicit forms because only those survive frictionless transmission. The shift is therefore temporal rather than geographical: cultures are not replaced by other cultures but by a medium that suspends culture. The aim is not to impose one civilisation upon another but to produce interaction without reference to civilisation at all.

The technical infrastructure of communication reveals this clearly. Universal writing systems no longer belong to a particular alphabet but to a standardised repertoire of characters that allows any sign to be encoded and transmitted identically everywhere. The technical possibility of including every script does not revive cultural specificity; it neutralises it. Each sign becomes equivalent because it exists as a unit within a global system rather than within a historical language. A symbol from one tradition and a symbol from another coexist as interchangeable elements inside a shared machine. The medium guarantees intelligibility by detaching expression from origin. Yet communication still requires a language. Attempts to invent neutral languages failed because they lacked social life, while local pidgins remained situational. What has emerged instead is a simplified, decultured use of an existing language functioning as a neutral exchange tool. Speakers unconsciously restrict vocabulary, avoid idiom and eliminate literary reference so that comprehension is maximised. Paradoxically, native speakers often become harder to understand because they retain richness that others cannot decode. Consensus therefore forms around expressions understandable to everyone even if they belong fully to no one. The language survives precisely because it is no longer tied to the culture that produced it. It is preserved outside identity.

The bureaucratic form of this language intensifies the tendency. Official communication avoids any phrase that presupposes a specific worldview. The ideal statement contains no local resonance and therefore cannot offend or confuse. Its neutrality is achieved by removing depth. Communication becomes administrative rather than expressive. The goal is not eloquence but interoperability. Humour disappears because it depends on shared background. Emotion remains permitted only if immediately recognisable and standardised. Thus pictorial markers substitute for tone. The sender does not express a feeling but selects one from a catalogue. Emotion becomes a parameter. Body language follows the same trajectory. Gestures rooted in local habits produce uncertainty in global interaction, so physical expression is either reduced or standardised into a small set of universally recognised signals. Distance communication accelerates this process. Written messages increasingly resemble spoken exchanges stripped of presence, while predictive suggestions replace spontaneous phrasing. Conversation flattens into exchangeable fragments because fragments travel better than situations. Speech becomes disembodied yet not literary; it exists between voice and text, without the density of either. Translation undergoes a comparable transformation. Traditional translation sought meaning beyond words, interpreting context, intention and nuance. Automated translation instead calculates probability across enormous datasets. It does not understand but correlates. Its success depends on the fact that communication itself has already become more statistical than

contextual. The more language abandons ambiguity, the more calculation suffices. What appears as technological progress mirrors a prior simplification of expression.

This coded environment resonates with a broader shift in how social interaction is conceived. Traits once regarded as social difficulties—literal interpretation, discomfort with implicit cues, need for clear rules—fit the new communication perfectly. Precision replaces intuition as the valued competence. The ability to follow explicit instructions becomes socially advantageous, while sensitivity to nuance becomes inefficient. Social life adapts to systems that privilege clarity over interpretation, making behaviour measurable and predictable. Emotional life is not eliminated but regulated through defined categories that prevent overwhelming uncertainty. The desire for norms arises not from authoritarian instinct but from the anxiety produced by a world where context has vanished. The codification of emotion illustrates this transformation most vividly. Graphic signs representing feelings do not imitate natural expressions; they establish arbitrary links between symbol and affect. A finite set of discrete options replaces the fluid spectrum of lived experience. Complex feelings appear as combinations of simple units rather than as ambiguous states requiring narrative. Literature once staged emotion through description and reflection, allowing interpretation to unfold. Coded emotion requires no commentary. It communicates instantly and exhaustively because it refers only to itself. The feeling becomes legible precisely by losing depth. Such standardisation does not erase cultural variation entirely; communities adapt the code creatively, producing subcultural nuances. Yet these variations remain within the system rather than restoring the older background. The code evolves into a flexible language but not into a shared world. It renews communication without re-creating culture. The implicit does not return as tradition but as playful deviation.

The demand for explicitness also reshapes domains historically founded on mystery. Religion, once structured by transcendence, becomes subject to demands for transparency. Rituals are simplified so they can be understood, and doctrines are translated into ordinary speech. What cannot be clarified appears suspect. Conversely, other movements emphasise rules to preserve certainty. Both tendencies reflect the same impulse: remove ambiguity, whether by rational explanation or by strict regulation. The sacred becomes either ethical instruction or behavioural code. The vertical dimension collapses into procedure. A similar movement affects theories of the psyche. Interpretations centred on hidden meaning give way to classifications based on observable behaviour. Disturbances are defined through measurable symptoms and placed on continuous scales. Therapy aims at correction and adaptation rather than interpretation. Categories multiply because they must capture every deviation in precise terms. Individuals are evaluated not through biography but through indicators. The inner life ceases to be a mystery and becomes a dataset. Across these transformations a single logic operates. Interior depth—whether cultural, religious or psychological—loses authority because it cannot be standardised. What remains relevant is what can be coded, compared and adjusted. The person is understood through actions that can be isolated from context and positioned on a scale. The past, unconscious and tradition no longer serve as explanations; they are replaced by behavioural descriptions.

Communication thus becomes the model for society itself. When understanding no longer depends on shared meaning but on shared protocol, relationships resemble interfaces. Individuals interact through recognised formats rather than negotiated worlds. The system promises equality because everyone follows the same rules, yet it achieves equality by reducing singularity. A gesture counts only if recognised by the code; an emotion matters only if selectable from the list; a belief is acceptable only if expressed in approved form. This

development is not imposed by conspiracy but by the search for frictionless exchange in a global environment. Cultural interpretation slows interaction, while coding accelerates it. The price of speed is the disappearance of the unsaid. Without the unsaid there is no misunderstanding, yet also no discovery. Conversation ceases to reveal persons and instead confirms compliance.

In such a world interiority becomes irrelevant because nothing requires it. The shared imaginary that once surrounded speech dissolves into operational clarity. Meaning is no longer negotiated but predefined. What remains of communication is perfectly functional yet strangely silent: everyone understands, yet nothing resonates beyond the message.

Undoing the Miracle: When the Tribe Reclaims the Individual

Jonah Goldberg, in Suicide of the West, frames the crisis of free societies as a recurring drama in which human nature returns the moment people stop tending the fragile achievements of civilisation. The point is not that humans are doomed to barbarism, but that nothing in politics, morality, or social order runs on autopilot. The forces that pull people back toward tribal loyalty, predatory violence, and status hunger do not need to be invented; they are waiting, like a default setting, and they reactivate whenever supervision weakens, institutions lose legitimacy, or public virtue becomes a quaint slogan rather than a practiced discipline. Civilisation is therefore not a permanent condition but a continuous effort: the channelling of impulse into forms that allow strangers to live together without having to love one another, and without having to fear one another all the time. The moment that effort is treated as an inheritance rather than a task, decay begins.

A useful way to picture this is to imagine a small group removed from the scaffolding of everyday order. When rules are no longer enforced and reputations no longer anchored to adult authority, people do not calmly negotiate a new social contract. They improvise dominance. Coalitions form quickly, not merely to secure food but to establish hierarchy, to divide insiders from outsiders, to invent threats that justify obedience, and to sacralise the group's power in the language of fear. In such conditions, violence is not an accidental failure of civility but a reappearance of an older logic: the conversion of anxiety into ritual, and ritual into permission. The 'beast' people fear is not an animal outside the camp; it is the appetite inside each person for certainty, safety, and superiority. It cannot be killed, because it is not a foreign invader. It can only be restrained, and restraint requires constant vigilance.

This is the deeper meaning of corruption. In everyday politics the word often means bribery, self-dealing, or the use of office for personal gain. That meaning is accurate, but too small. Corruption, in the older moral sense, is spoilage, decomposition, a return of the world to dust and rot. It names the unromantic truth that what people build naturally falls apart unless they keep repairing it. Before modern hygiene, refrigeration, antibiotics, and reliable infrastructure, this was not an abstract metaphor. Food turned. Wounds festered. Buildings decayed. The line between life and putrefaction was thin. In that setting it made sense to see moral and political order as a similar battle against entropy: to neglect the duties of maintenance was to invite a slow-motion collapse into disorder. When people speak of decadent societies, they are often invoking this image of rot: a civilisation that has stopped policing its impulses and has therefore surrendered to the natural forces of disintegration.

If that sounds harsh, it is because it denies a comforting modern fantasy: that progress is automatic, that the moral arc bends by itself, that the next generation will simply inherit the habits of restraint and deepen them through education and empathy. The argument here is more sober. Humans naturally take what they can, especially from those who do not belong to their circle. Humans naturally favour kin and friends. Humans naturally convert power into privilege and then rationalise privilege as justice. These tendencies are not unique to any class or era; they are structural features of social life. Every civilisation therefore builds rules that force people to treat strangers as something other than prey. Over time the definition of what counts as a 'productive' or 'just' end can improve, moving from the interests of rulers to broader ideals of human dignity, equal treatment, and lawful constraint. Yet the impulse to bend those ideals toward advantage does not disappear when the ideals improve. It simply learns new languages.

This becomes easiest to see where violence and sexuality meet, because there the distinction between civilisation and regression is unmistakable. The act of violating another person is not an innovation of any modern economic system or political ideology; it is one of the oldest assertions of dominance. Historically, many societies treated sexual violation as a routine extension of conquest: a way of humiliating the defeated, rewarding the victors, and reproducing the victor's line through the bodies of the conquered. What makes this horrifying is not only the suffering of the victim, but the social normality that once surrounded the act. A crucial achievement of modern liberal civilisation is that it has worked, over centuries, to stigmatise this behaviour and to treat it as a crime rather than a spoils system. That achievement is not 'natural'. It is an artificial construct in the best sense: a human-made moral boundary that protects the vulnerable from the strong. To say that the impulse to violate is natural is not to excuse it. It is to clarify why moral progress is always fragile. The rule against violation has to be learned, internalised, defended, and enforced, and it can be weakened by the same complacency that weakens all taboo.

Once this is understood, virtue stops sounding like a sermon and starts sounding like a technology. Virtue is the capacity to hold an impulse at bay and to prefer a moral rule to a convenient appetite. It is not the absence of desire; it is the discipline that refuses to let desire rule. That is why courage matters even outside war. Courage is what allows people to pay the cost of principle: to tell the truth when lying would be easier, to follow fair procedure when cheating would help one's side, to restrain vengeance when vengeance would feel satisfying. A civilisation that cannot cultivate this moral muscle will inevitably substitute procedures for character, and surveillance for trust. But procedures without virtue become brittle, because they depend on fear of punishment rather than love of the good.

One reason modern societies struggle to speak about corruption in this older sense is that they have become uneasy with the idea of cycles: growth and decay, rise and fall, renewal and collapse. Many modern doctrines promise that history moves in a single direction, from darkness to light, from superstition to rationality, from oppression to liberation. Yet everyday experience still teaches that everything living, including political orders, decomposes unless maintained. People may be tempted to mock older religious and philosophical anxieties about decay as pessimism, but those anxieties carried practical wisdom: they warned that the world is not naturally ordered toward goodness, and that the line between civilisation and savagery can be crossed quickly.

This is also why blaming 'elites' is both necessary and insufficient. The powerful matter because they command institutions, write rules, and distribute rewards. But corruption is not a

disease confined to the top. It is a human temptation that becomes more visible when multiplied by power. If a society replaces one ruling class with another through revolution or purges, the temptations do not vanish; they migrate to the new winners. The top floor of any building can be demolished, but another floor becomes the top. If people believe that moral purity arrives automatically when the ‘right’ faction takes power, they are simply dressing an ancient fantasy in modern language. The more realistic question is how to design institutions that restrain winners as well as losers, and how to cultivate a culture that expects restraint rather than celebrating domination as authenticity.

A particularly instructive example is nepotism, which feels almost wholesome when practised at the level of family life. People want to help their children and friends. They want to convert success into security for those they love. That impulse is deeply human, and that is precisely why it becomes politically dangerous when mapped onto the state. When the state becomes an extension of family, the public treasury turns into private property, offices become inheritances, and law becomes a mask for patronage. Religious and imperial institutions have repeatedly tried to block this tendency through rules that deny officials the ability to convert public trust into family advantage. Sometimes they impose celibacy, sometimes professional exams, sometimes radical restrictions on inheritance, sometimes even brutal bodily measures. Yet the tendency returns in new forms because the root is not the availability of a method but the persistence of human attachment. You can alter incentives, but you cannot abolish kin loyalty. The task is therefore not to shame human nature for existing, but to build counterweights strong enough to prevent its most destructive political expressions.

Here pluralism becomes more than a fashionable slogan about diversity. It becomes a structural remedy for the inevitability of coalition. Humans form groups. Groups pursue interests. Over time, any cohesive group that holds power tends to convert that power into a permanent advantage, and then to justify its advantage as the natural order. The only reliable defence is to prevent any single group from capturing the entire machinery of coercion. A society that multiplies institutions, disperses authority, and forces rival centres of power to negotiate creates a discipline that no sermon can replace. When there are enough independent institutions, politics becomes impersonal in the best sense: rules matter more than favours, procedures matter more than friendships, and power cannot be exercised solely through personal loyalty. The deepest achievement of the rule of law is not that it restrains the weak; it is that it binds the strong, and does so in ways that remain legitimate even when one’s own faction loses.

This institutional pluralism also requires a psychological transformation: the acceptance that opponents have the right to be wrong. That acceptance is not natural. In tribal settings, disagreement is often experienced as betrayal, because identity is fused with group survival. In freer societies, identity is divided across multiple loyalties: family and work, community and vocation, faith and citizenship, friendship and law. These competing attachments soften the absolutism of any single cause. They create spaces where opponents can be treated as neighbours rather than enemies. The price is that no identity can demand total possession of the person. Yet the reward is peace, and the possibility of freedom.

The most difficult implication of this argument is that modern market society, despite its impersonality, is one of the great inventions for cooperating with strangers. People do not need to share blood, tribe, or worldview to exchange goods under neutral rules. Money, contracts, and law feel cold precisely because they do not require intimacy. But their moral achievement is that they make intimacy optional rather than mandatory. They allow people to reserve family

loyalty for family while treating strangers fairly, instead of turning the whole society into a family in which outsiders are always suspect. The recurring political temptation is to impose the emotional logic of the family or tribe onto the large impersonal order, demanding that society feel like a community of kin. That desire can be compassionate, but it can also become coercive, because the state then becomes the instrument by which one coalition forces its vision of belonging onto everyone else.

The 'miracle' of a free society, then, is not that human nature has been transcended, but that it has been redirected. It is a form of maintenance against entropy, a constant repair of institutions, habits, and virtues that keep people from sliding back into the oldest default: my tribe, my victory, your loss. Complacency is therefore not merely laziness; it is a slow suicide. A civilisation survives only by tending its moral and institutional defences, refusing to romanticise regression as authenticity, and remembering that freedom is not a family heirloom but a discipline that must be learned again, defended again, and practised again by each generation.

Goldberg, J. (2018) Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy. New York: Crown Forum.

The Return of the Tribe: Equality, Identity, and the War Over the Individual

In Jonah Goldberg's Suicide of the West, the discussion of contemporary tribalism begins from a paradox: a civilisation founded on the dignity of the individual gradually rediscovers the political psychology of the group. The liberal order promised that a person could be judged by character rather than origin, yet modern discourse increasingly interprets individuals as expressions of collective identity. The tension is not accidental. Every society that attempts to ground belonging in abstract principles must confront the older instinct that belonging arises from shared blood, history, and symbolic boundaries. The liberal experiment sought to replace inherited status with chosen participation, but this replacement never fully erased the deeper human inclination toward categorisation. The early justification of equality depended on a peculiar rhetorical move. Reformers did not reject foundational ideals but insisted that they be applied consistently. The argument was persuasive because it worked within the moral grammar of the society rather than against it. Inclusion was achieved not by discarding the universal principle but by expanding its scope. This logic required patience and social trust, because the transformation depended on gradual internalisation rather than administrative imposition. Cultural change occurred through manners as much as through law: the everyday habit of treating strangers as individuals rather than representatives of a group.

Yet universalism always contained a counterforce. The same culture that valued personal autonomy also required a shared civic identity. The equilibrium between personal distinctiveness and collective belonging was maintained through time and voluntary association. Communities could preserve traditions without imposing them universally, and individuals could adopt new affiliations without erasing origins. The balance functioned because identity was lived before it was theorised. It was embedded in neighbourhoods, occupations, and ordinary routines rather than declared in ideological language. Modern politics altered this arrangement by transforming identity into a conscious framework. Instead of emerging organically, belonging became something to be articulated, defended, and verified. Once identity is expressed explicitly, it invites comparison and competition. If recognition becomes a public good, groups must demonstrate why they deserve it. The demand for

recognition therefore produces a discourse of grievance, because grievance functions as proof of moral entitlement. Politics shifts from negotiating interests to adjudicating moral status. At this point universal equality begins to appear suspicious. A principle that treats individuals alike seems to ignore historical injuries. The claim arises that neutrality conceals domination, and that impartial standards merely preserve hidden hierarchies. The consequence is a reinterpretation of fairness: equality no longer means identical rules but proportional outcomes. When outcomes diverge, the divergence itself becomes evidence of injustice. Statistical imbalance is taken as moral imbalance. The argument ceases to examine individual choices and instead attributes agency to structures.

Such reasoning alters the concept of merit. Achievement, once interpreted as evidence of effort or talent, is reinterpreted as a manifestation of advantage. Neutral procedures become morally questionable because they fail to correct inherited disparities. The aim of politics shifts from guaranteeing opportunity to engineering distribution. The individual becomes less a bearer of responsibility and more a node within historical processes. Evaluation concerns group membership rather than personal action. This transformation has psychological consequences. If people are primarily representatives of categories, disagreement acquires existential weight. Debate no longer concerns competing ideas but conflicting identities. To dispute a claim is interpreted as denying a lived experience. Speech becomes harm because words are seen as extensions of group power. The protection of dignity therefore requires the regulation of expression. Language is no longer merely descriptive; it becomes an instrument that either validates or negates existence. Institutions adapt accordingly. Educational spaces cease to function as arenas of contestation and instead become environments of affirmation. The purpose of discourse shifts from persuasion to recognition. Exposure to opposing views is redefined as aggression because it destabilises identity certainty. The concept of safety migrates from physical protection to emotional insulation. As a result, intellectual disagreement resembles moral transgression.

A new authority emerges within this environment. Every civilisation produces interpreters who define acceptable thought, but the criteria now rest on sensitivity rather than doctrine. Authority belongs to those who can identify hidden harm. Their legitimacy depends on continuous vigilance, because the absence of offence would undermine the need for interpretation. Norms therefore expand indefinitely, refining distinctions and multiplying prohibitions. The system must remain dynamic to justify its guardians. This process creates a feedback loop between power and language. Words determine legitimacy, legitimacy determines participation, and participation determines influence. The control of vocabulary becomes equivalent to the control of reality. To rename an act is to redefine its moral status. What was once tolerated becomes unacceptable; what was once debated becomes unspeakable. Cultural change accelerates because language moves faster than practice. The reaction is predictable. Groups accused of privilege begin to experience themselves as targeted categories. They adopt the same logic used against them: if identity defines politics, then their identity must also be defended. Universalism collapses into symmetrical tribalism. Competing narratives of victimhood replace a shared narrative of citizenship. Each side views the other as a collective adversary rather than a collection of persons. Economic transformation intensifies this dynamic. Rapid change dissolves stable roles and leaves individuals searching for orientation. In the absence of predictable social structures, symbolic belonging becomes more valuable. Identity offers certainty where occupation and locality no longer provide it. Political entrepreneurs harness

this anxiety by attributing disruption to deliberate actors. Complex processes are personalised into antagonists. The tribe promises explanation and protection simultaneously.

Yet the underlying forces are impersonal. Innovation disrupts communities without intention. Markets reorganise lives without malice. Nevertheless, human psychology prefers agency to abstraction. People interpret structural change as moral betrayal because moral narratives are easier to grasp than systemic ones. Populist movements therefore emerge not simply from ideology but from the need to locate responsibility. The tribe supplies both culprits and solidarity. Attempts to halt change encounter a dilemma. Preventing disruption requires intervention, and intervention restricts freedom. Every effort to stabilise outcomes constrains choice. The desire for security conflicts with the autonomy that produced prosperity. The same civilisation that values progress longs for permanence. Politics oscillates between acceleration and preservation without resolving the tension. The deeper conflict is philosophical. Enlightenment thought proposed that individuals could shape their destiny independent of inherited categories. Tribal thought insists that destiny is embedded in collective identity. Contemporary culture oscillates between these premises. It celebrates individuality rhetorically while organising morality collectively. The result is instability: individuals are praised for uniqueness yet evaluated as representatives. A stable order requires mutual restraint. Majorities must avoid domination, and minorities must avoid absolutism. When either abandons reciprocity, legitimacy erodes. Universal principles depend on shared acceptance; they cannot survive if treated merely as instruments of advantage. Once every rule is interpreted as strategy, trust dissolves and politics becomes pure contest.

The crisis of modern societies is therefore not simply disagreement but a disagreement about the basis of disagreement. One side treats conflict as a negotiation among individuals; the other treats it as a struggle among identities. Without a common framework, compromise appears as surrender. Each concession strengthens the belief that the opponent seeks elimination rather than coexistence. The resurgence of tribal thinking is thus less a historical anomaly than a regression to default human organisation. The liberal order was always fragile because it required people to resist instincts older than civilisation. Its preservation depends not only on laws but on habits: patience, restraint, and the willingness to interpret others charitably. When these habits decline, institutions cannot compensate. The paradox of the modern age is that unprecedented freedom produces unprecedented insecurity. The absence of fixed roles liberates individuals but deprives them of orientation. Tribal narratives fill the vacuum because they provide meaning without ambiguity. Yet in solving the problem of belonging they recreate the problem of exclusion. The future of plural societies depends on recovering a distinction once taken for granted: that disagreement does not negate dignity. Without that distinction, politics becomes anthropology, and citizens become specimens of categories. The individual disappears into description, and the promise of equality transforms into the management of difference.

6. Duplicatum Loquitur

Myths After Reason: Pop Culture Politics and the Return of the Enchanted Tribe

Jonah Goldberg, in the chapter ‘Pop Culture Politics: Godzilla, Rock & Roll, and the Romantic Spirit’, describes a cultural paradox that can be stated simply: a society may talk like it lives by

reason, procedure, and neutral rules, yet dream, desire, and vote as if the world is ruled by fate, spectacle, monsters, and moral crusade. That paradox is not an accident or a side-effect of entertainment. It is a structural feature of modern life, because modernity did not abolish older impulses; it reorganised them, pushed them into new spaces, and then wondered why they returned with such intensity. The modern world prides itself on disenchantment, on turning the cosmos into an object of calculation, on separating private feelings from public reason. But what is separated does not vanish. It migrates. It becomes mood, aesthetic, identity, and myth. Popular culture is the most efficient vehicle for that migration because it can smuggle metaphysics into a shopping basket. A song can deliver a theology without naming it. A monster can perform political critique without ever mentioning politics. A hero can teach a moral psychology while claiming to be ‘just entertainment’. In this sense, the politics of pop culture is not a superficial layer pasted on reality. It is one of the places where reality is metabolised into meaning.

The difficulty begins with a word that many people instinctively distrust because it sounds vague, academic, or sentimental: romanticism. The suspicion is understandable, because the term has been stretched until it seems to cover everything from love poems to revolutions. Yet the core intuition behind it is not obscure. It names the recurring revolt of inward feeling against outward order, the insistence that the deepest truth is not what can be proved but what can be felt, the belief that a life becomes real only when it breaks the cage of convention. Modern institutions ask people to accept rules, delays, compromises, and impersonal standards. The romantic temperament hears this as a theft of life itself. It responds by enthroning authenticity, intensity, and transgression. It prefers the sacred to the procedural, the raw to the mediated, the immediate to the patient. This is why the term appears in discussions of art first: art was the earliest battlefield where the soul protested against measurement. But the protest never stayed inside art. Once inwardness becomes a public ideal, it demands a politics, because it wants the world to bend to the self.

Modernity is often described as a victory of reason over superstition, but it can also be understood as an unbundling of the human world. Earlier societies did not neatly separate science from magic, faith from public life, private feeling from civic duty. These domains were fused in a single symbolic order. Modernity did not melt that order into nothing; it broke it into fragments. When fragments break off, they do not cease to be material; they become smaller objects moving on their own trajectories. The result is a world where people may profess rationality in law and administration while continuing to crave enchantment in everyday experience. One can feel this craving most sharply when a piece of music transforms an ordinary street into a private cosmology. The city becomes a stage, the pedestrian becomes the protagonist, the noise of traffic becomes percussion, and the self experiences an elevated unity with the world. This does not require a doctrine. It requires a mood. The mood is the clue: disenchantment never fully disenchants the person; it merely changes the routes by which enchantment returns.

Music is an especially powerful route because it is both intimate and collective. It feels like the voice inside the body, yet it can synchronise thousands of bodies in a single rhythm. That doubleness explains why certain genres repeatedly present themselves as forces of liberation rather than as products for consumption. The rhetoric insists on more than enjoyment. It claims revelation. It speaks as if the proper authority is not tradition or reason but the pulse of inner truth. It also speaks as if the system, whatever it is called in a given decade, is a machine that drains life, and that the self must revolt to remain human. This is not merely adolescent

posturing, though adolescence is naturally drawn to it, because adolescence is the age when the person feels the collision between social scripts and emergent desire. The adolescent experiences rules not as a shared achievement but as a personal imprisonment, and so a politics of authenticity arrives already shaped like rebellion. Yet the same posture does not disappear with age; it can be extended into an adult identity, especially in societies that make comfort and stability widely available. Prosperity can produce its own dissatisfaction, because when survival is less urgent, meaning becomes the primary battlefield. In such conditions, the romantic mood searches for antagonists and finds them everywhere: bureaucracy, conformity, corporate life, 'selling out', manners, and even the idea that there is a normal life one should want.

This is where monsters become politically useful. A monster is not just a creature that frightens; it is a warning given a body. It dramatizes the fear that reality has a hidden cost, that progress awakens revenge, that human mastery over nature becomes a curse. Modernity is haunted by the suspicion that, in breaking the old spells, it has created new ones, and that these new spells are colder, less merciful, and harder to name. The monster is the name. It externalises anxieties about technology, contamination, mutation, and the arrogance of control. In the nuclear age, the monster is often born from radiation, a force that feels simultaneously scientific and magical, invisible yet omnipotent, a modern version of forbidden fire. The monster then stomps through a city as if to demonstrate what the mind already feels: that the machine civilisation built cannot always be steered by the people who built it. The story becomes a moral physics lesson. Power escapes its designers. Consequences are bigger than intentions. The price of mastery is vulnerability to catastrophe.

Horror intensifies this logic by putting evil back into a world that claims to have explained everything. One of the most unsettling modern fears is not that evil exists, but that evil is reducible to dysfunction, that it can be managed by technique, that the moral dimension is merely a medical category. When horror insists that evil is real, it stages a conflict between sterile competence and the stubborn depth of the human. The narrative becomes a referendum on the limits of modern explanation. The laboratories, the instruments, and the professional vocabularies appear strangely small in the face of spiritual terror. In that confrontation, the audience is not simply thrilled; it is reminded that the modern promise of total rational control is emotionally uninhabitable. The feeling is not primarily theological; it is existential. The world, many stories insist, is 'not supposed to be like this'. That sentence is the romantic engine. It turns disappointment into metaphysics, discomfort into critique, and critique into a longing for a more enchanted order.

Once that engine is running, the hero changes shape. A modern hero is increasingly defined not by service to a common good but by fidelity to a private code. The code may be noble or monstrous; the form is what matters. Integrity becomes formal, a matter of inner consistency rather than moral content. This is why popular narratives can make an assassin admirable if the assassin follows a rule, can make a criminal loveable if the criminal displays style, can make a predator fascinating if the predator has taste and discipline. The audience is asked to respect strength of will as such. The hero becomes the person who refuses compromise, who claims authenticity against the hypocrisy of polite society, who obeys an inward law even when the outward law calls it crime. This figure is politically potent because it trains the imagination to treat institutions as cages and transgression as selfhood. The public then becomes more receptive to leaders who promise to 'break the rules' on behalf of 'real people', and more contemptuous of procedural restraint as mere cowardice or corruption. A politics of the strong self is born from the aesthetics of the strong self.

The deepest political effect, however, may lie in how popular culture reorganises moral expectation. In daily life, people are trained for restraint, for due process, for the slow disciplines that make coexistence possible. In narrative life, those disciplines are often suspended. The audience returns, with astonishing ease, to a tribal moral dialect: us and them, purity and contamination, betrayal and vengeance, honour and humiliation. This does not mean the audience becomes evil. It means the audience rediscovers a pleasure that civilisation cannot openly endorse: the pleasure of direct moral settlement. The fantasy is not merely violence; it is clarity. It is the removal of ambiguity. It is the dream that the guilty can be known without mistake, that punishment can be immediate, that the world can be rebalanced by decisive force. This is why stories so often treat coercion as efficacy. In the civic world, torture is debated as a moral catastrophe and a political risk; in the narrative world, it is frequently presented as the shortcut that saves the innocent in the final minutes. The viewer cheers not because the viewer has reasoned toward cruelty, but because the viewer is temporarily liberated from the burdens of uncertainty. The fantasy says: the hard choice is clean, the evil is visible, the suffering of the enemy is justified by the safety of the tribe. That is tribal justice in cinematic form.

Once this is seen, pop culture politics looks less like a set of messages and more like a training ground for sensation. It tutors the audience in what kinds of emotions feel righteous, what kinds of enemies feel real, what kinds of leaders feel authentic, and what kinds of institutions feel contemptible. It also reveals why modern societies oscillate between procedural ideals and moral crusades. Procedure is experienced as cold, slow, and indifferent to pain. Crusade is experienced as warm, quick, and morally meaningful. In a time of anxiety, people often choose meaning over patience. The romantic mood then becomes politically decisive. It converts personal dissatisfaction into a cosmic grievance and offers a script: reject the system, identify the villain, join the tribe, restore the world. The crucial danger is not that this script exists, because scripts are unavoidable. The danger is that the script becomes more believable than reality, and that civic life begins to imitate entertainment: heroes, villains, purity tests, and cathartic violence, whether literal or rhetorical. When that happens, the shared world is no longer negotiated; it is performed. The tribe does not persuade; it signals. The enemy is not argued with; it is exorcised. And the miracle of a plural society, held together by restraint and mutual forbearance, is undone not by a single ideology but by a hunger for enchantment that modernity never learned to satisfy responsibly.

Goldberg, J. (2018) Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy. New York: Crown Forum.

The Grammar of Us and Them: How Identity Becomes Destiny

In Nikos Sotirakopoulos' book The Tribalist Mind the reader encounters a disturbing reminder that modern societies are never as far from primordial violence as they imagine. The massacre in Rwanda is not presented as an eruption of madness in a remote place but as a revelation of a structure of perception: people ceased to see neighbours as persons and began to see them as categories. The shock lies not in cruelty alone but in familiarity. The victims were known individually; precisely for that reason they had to be un-known conceptually. A human being had to be cognitively replaced by a label before a hand could be raised against them. Tribalism therefore begins not in the hand but in perception. It is an epistemology before it is a crime. The modern mind often comforts itself with distance. It treats atrocities as exotic pathologies belonging to unstable societies, imagining that education, technology, and prosperity immunise

communities from similar patterns. Yet tribal perception does not require visible differences. Where language, religion, and appearance coincide, classification still emerges. The category is not discovered; it is imposed. Once imposed, it reorganises reality. Memory rewrites itself, moral judgment becomes selective, and affection obeys allegiance. The individual disappears into a narrative larger than experience. People no longer evaluate actions; they evaluate belonging. Many observers attempt to explain such behaviour biologically. They argue that the human organism evolved for small groups and therefore instinctively favours insiders. Preference, they say, is survival translated into psychology. Yet this explanation confuses capacity with destiny. The ability to form attachments does not necessitate the transformation of attachment into hostility. Cooperation produces society; tribalism produces metaphysics. The former recognises companions; the latter constructs essences. The decisive step occurs when difference becomes moral substance.

Group identity becomes dangerous when it functions as an interpretive shortcut. Judging a person requires attention, memory, and comparison. Judging a category requires only recognition. The mind economises effort by substituting abstraction for encounter. From this moment the other is no longer evaluated but decoded. Every action confirms expectation, every deviation is dismissed as disguise. Justice collapses into consistency with prejudice. A member of one's own side is interpreted through circumstances; a member of the opposing side is interpreted through character. Thus double standards arise not from hypocrisy but from structure. The framework itself distributes empathy unevenly. Such thinking flourishes because it offers relief from uncertainty. Individual reality is complex, contradictory, and morally demanding. Collective identity simplifies. It transforms the world into a map with clear territories. Belonging supplies orientation; opposition supplies meaning. The self acquires certainty by borrowing it from the group. This is why hostility often intensifies when factual differences are minimal. The less visible the boundary, the more insistently it must be asserted. The category compensates for its fragility through emotional intensity. Yet tribalism is not merely emotional. It involves a decision about how consciousness operates. One may treat perception as evidence requiring interpretation, or as confirmation requiring loyalty. The first approach demands effort and tolerates revision. The second demands allegiance and punishes doubt. Under the second mode, disagreement threatens identity rather than argument. A challenge to belief becomes a challenge to belonging. Thought is experienced as betrayal.

From this perspective the phenomenon often called groupthink is not mysterious. It is convenient. Independent judgment requires responsibility for error; conformity distributes responsibility across the collective. The cost of being wrong alone exceeds the cost of being wrong together. Therefore the group becomes an epistemic shelter. People adopt conclusions not because they are persuaded but because persuasion is unnecessary once affiliation determines credibility. Evidence becomes secondary to source. Truth is recognised by accent. This mechanism explains why political divisions increasingly resemble rival communities rather than competing programmes. The traditional vocabulary of left and right once referred to distinct visions of society. Today it frequently designates moral territories. Positions may shift while allegiances remain stable. Individuals adopt opinions in sequence rather than derive them from principle. A person belongs first and reasons afterward. Debate becomes translation between moral dialects rather than evaluation of propositions. Identity politics intensifies this process by making belonging itself the basis of political legitimacy. When social identity becomes political identity, disagreement acquires existential weight. The group does not merely advocate interests; it embodies justice. Opposition therefore appears immoral by definition.

Two forms emerge. One appeals to universal inclusion, demanding recognition within a shared framework of rights. The other constructs solidarity through opposition, uniting members by naming an adversary. The first expands community; the second sharpens boundaries. Modern conflicts increasingly adopt the latter structure because hostility mobilises more reliably than agreement. Negative partisanship illustrates the transformation. Participation arises less from support for one's side than from aversion to the other. Political energy feeds on repulsion. Campaigns succeed not by inspiring hope but by amplifying fear of alternative victory. Citizens act not to realise a vision but to prevent a nightmare. In such conditions compromise resembles surrender, and moderation resembles treason. The political arena becomes a theatre of moral defence rather than collective problem solving.

Cultural conflicts follow a similar logic. Questions once considered personal become symbolic markers of allegiance. Consumption habits, language, entertainment, and private relationships acquire political significance because they signal belonging. Everyday life becomes a referendum on identity. The result is continuous mobilisation. Society experiences itself as permanent controversy because every gesture can be interpreted as a declaration. Yet the persistence of tribalism does not demonstrate inevitability. Historical examples show rapid transformation when modes of interpretation change. Communities capable of intense hostility can later coexist peacefully once categorical perception weakens. What alters is not instinct but orientation. Individuals resume evaluating actions instead of affiliations. The neighbour returns as a person rather than a representative. Understanding this possibility requires acknowledging the role of volition in cognition. Thinking is not automatic attention; it is directed attention. One may examine reality or evade it. The tribal mindset depends upon selective perception sustained by emotional investment. To abandon it is not to suppress feeling but to redirect evaluation toward facts rather than membership. Moral judgment shifts from inheritance to observation. When consciousness functions in this manner, identity loses its determinative authority. Characteristics such as race, gender, class, or profession cease to predict moral status. They remain descriptive but not prescriptive. The individual becomes interpretable only through actions and choices. Responsibility returns to the person rather than the category. Conflict does not vanish but changes character, moving from existential opposition to practical disagreement.

The alternative, however, is seductive because it offers narrative coherence. Tribalism supplies a ready explanation for misfortune: injustice originates in the other tribe. Complexity dissolves into struggle. Personal frustration acquires historical meaning. The individual becomes protagonist in a collective drama. Such narratives are psychologically powerful precisely because they simplify causality. They transform contingency into necessity. The danger emerges when this narrative replaces reality as the horizon of perception. Violence becomes conceivable once moral evaluation attaches to identity instead of conduct. The step from resentment to elimination appears logical within the framework. If the category itself is culpable, innocence becomes impossible. The tragic events that once shocked humanity then become intelligible within the constructed worldview. The unimaginable becomes rationalised. The contemporary culture wars reveal a milder but structurally similar dynamic. Social actors interpret disagreement as proof of moral corruption rather than intellectual divergence. Dialogue collapses because persuasion presupposes shared standards of judgment. Without shared standards, speech functions as signalling rather than reasoning. Communication becomes performance for one's side.

Escaping this pattern requires restoring the primacy of individual evaluation. A society that recognises persons before groups does not abolish difference but contextualises it. Loyalty becomes voluntary association rather than cognitive filter. Political affiliation becomes provisional rather than essential. The individual mind regains authority over inherited narratives. Tribalism therefore represents not humanity's past but a recurring option. It appears whenever the effort of thinking yields to the comfort of belonging. The choice is continuous and local, enacted in ordinary judgments long before it manifests in collective conflict. Every time a person replaces examination with categorisation, the structure strengthens. Every time one judges an action independently of allegiance, it weakens. The question confronting modern societies is not whether humans possess the capacity for tribalism but whether they will adopt it as their primary lens. The answer determines whether politics remains a negotiation among individuals or degenerates into confrontation among identities. Civilization depends less on eliminating passion than on directing perception. Where perception honours reality over affiliation, coexistence becomes possible. Where affiliation defines reality, conflict becomes inevitable.

Sotirakopoulos, N. (2019) The Tribalist Mind: Identity Politics and Tribalism. London: Societas.

From Revolution to Identity: The Drift Toward Group Consciousness

In Nikos Sotirakopoulos' book The Tribalist Mind the transformation of the political left is presented not primarily as a shift of policies but as a shift of metaphysics. Earlier movements possessed an almost religious certainty about history. They believed the structure of the world was intelligible, that conflict followed laws, and that once those laws were grasped collective action could reshape society. Political organisation functioned like engineering: assemble the class, seize power, redesign production, and a rational order would emerge. Individuals might have been confused, but the collective mind was assumed to possess clarity. This confidence explains why adherents endured persecution and sacrifice. Their courage rested on a conviction that history had direction and that they stood within it. The later movements inherited the language of critique but lost the faith in destination. The catastrophes of the twentieth century dissolved the belief that progress automatically followed planning. Industrial capacity had produced abundance but also mechanised death. Technology promised emancipation yet revealed unprecedented domination. The future no longer appeared as a solved equation but as a permanent risk. Under such conditions, critique survived while programme vanished. The task was no longer to build the new world but to expose the falseness of the existing one. This produced a peculiar mood: certainty about injustice combined with uncertainty about remedy. Society was condemned as alienating, yet the alternative could not be clearly described. Instead of a blueprint, there emerged suspicion toward all blueprints. Large narratives became suspect because they had justified large tragedies. The human being was reimagined not as a rational agent shaping reality but as a fragile consciousness damaged by systems it barely understood. The problem shifted from exploitation to estrangement. One no longer needed to prove material misery; psychological discomfort sufficed as evidence of disorder. From this perspective reason itself appeared compromised. If rationality had built bureaucratic destruction, perhaps it could not be trusted as a guide. The modern individual became comparable to a figure expelled from an original unity with nature: aware, reflective, yet permanently displaced. The promise of mastery over the world transformed into anxiety about unintended consequences. Humanity was no longer Promethean but Icarian, punished not for weakness but for ambition. Cultural expression mirrored this shift. Music, literature, and art ceased celebrating liberation through

knowledge and began evoking approaching catastrophe, environmental collapse, and existential exhaustion. The imagination filled with endings rather than beginnings. Escape became more appealing than transformation. Communes, psychedelics, and spiritual experimentation offered not a programme for society but a refuge from it. The aim was authenticity rather than reconstruction. Personal experience replaced historical mission.

Once confidence in universal solutions dissolves, the question arises: how should one live amid uncertainty? One answer is to seek smaller certainties. If reason cannot guarantee truth and progress cannot guarantee safety, belonging can guarantee orientation. Group identity becomes a substitute for metaphysical assurance. The individual who doubts the world trusts the circle. Political commitment shifts from future plans to present solidarity. This explains why activism increasingly emphasises experience, recognition, and affirmation rather than institutional redesign. The object of criticism also changed. The earlier accusation against capitalism was that it impoverished. The new accusation was that it satisfied materially while emptying spiritually. Prosperity itself became suspicious because it masked deeper dissatisfaction. The system could not be redeemed by distribution since the problem was meaning. Consequently, political struggle migrated from factories to culture. Marginalised identities replaced the universal worker as the emblem of transformation. They were not chosen merely for strategic reasons but because their experience symbolised the fragmentation of modern existence. Yet this shift introduced a paradox. Without a universal measure, claims of injustice required validation through recognition rather than demonstration. The authority of suffering replaced the authority of argument. Politics became expressive before it became practical. Demonstrations functioned as declarations of moral presence rather than steps toward institutional change. The goal was visibility. Participation itself constituted victory because it created a community where participants felt restored. Such movements often formed temporary micro-societies: camps, collectives, and alternative spaces organised less by doctrine than by emotional alignment. Participants described awakening, authenticity, and belonging. Decision-making avoided hierarchy, programmes remained fluid, and long-term plans were frequently rejected as reproducing the structures being criticised. The experience of togetherness mattered more than the outcome of negotiation. Action became ritual affirmation rather than instrumental intervention. In these spaces, knowledge also changed character. Expertise associated with established institutions appeared suspect because those institutions embodied the criticised order. Intuition, spirituality, and personal narrative acquired authority. Practices ranging from meditation to symbolic performance served not only psychological needs but epistemic ones: they offered certainty in a world perceived as opaque. When objective explanation loses trust, subjective resonance becomes credible.

The absence of shared doctrine, however, required a new organising principle. Identity fulfilled this role. Individuals united around perceived marginalisation rather than shared theory. Loyalty was grounded in recognition rather than agreement. The collective no longer marched toward a future society but defended present experience. The resulting structure resembled a constellation of overlapping circles rather than a hierarchy of classes. Each circle possessed its own narrative and moral vocabulary. This orientation extended beyond activism into institutions. Organisations adopted frameworks that classified individuals primarily through group membership in order to rectify perceived imbalances. Representation replaced universality as the measure of justice. Bureaucratic systems emerged to monitor recognition and administer fairness. These systems required continual refinement because categories multiplied and intersected. The goal was protection and validation rather than transformation

of economic structure. The effect was to shift political legitimacy from argument to standing. A claim's authority depended on the identity of the claimant. Knowledge became perspectival; experience determined credibility. The individual appeared less as an independent thinker than as a voice of a location within a moral landscape. Equality meant equitable attention among groups rather than identical principles for persons. This development did not originate from malice but from insecurity. When belief in common rational standards weakens, fairness must be secured through managed balance among communities. Administration replaces persuasion. The system expands because each recognition produces a new expectation of recognition. The sphere of vulnerability grows until most individuals qualify for some category requiring protection. Society reorganises itself around negotiation of sensitivities. The transformation from universalism to identity thus follows a psychological logic. The loss of confidence in reason produces uncertainty; uncertainty seeks shelter in belonging; belonging demands recognition; recognition requires structure. What began as critique of domination ends as management of difference. The individual becomes secondary to the classification meant to secure their dignity.

Yet this evolution also alters political conflict. Opponents no longer dispute policies but challenge legitimacy. If identity grounds truth, disagreement appears as denial of existence. Dialogue becomes precarious because compromise threatens self-definition. Alliances fluctuate not through persuasion but through alignment of grievances. Politics resembles coexistence of moral communities rather than contest of programmes. The earlier revolutionary faith imagined liberation through universal emancipation. The later sensibility seeks safety through particular affirmation. Both share a common element: the primacy of the group over the isolated individual. The difference lies in scale. The first trusted a single collective destiny; the second multiplies destinies while preserving the same epistemic structure. In each case the person interprets reality through affiliation. This continuity explains why contemporary divisions persist even where material conditions improve. Conflicts are sustained not by scarcity but by interpretation. When identity frames perception, disagreement cannot easily resolve because evidence rarely overrides belonging. The debate concerns recognition rather than outcome. The historical shift therefore represents less a break than a mutation. Confidence gave way to doubt, programme to expression, class to identity, yet the centre of gravity remained collective. The individual mind lost primacy to the narrative of membership. What changed was not the existence of tribes but their number and justification. Understanding this trajectory clarifies the present cultural landscape. Movements oscillate between moral urgency and conceptual vagueness because they inherit critique without teleology. They know what they reject but hesitate to specify what they build. Community compensates for uncertainty, and recognition compensates for explanation. The result is a politics of lived experience where meaning is generated through participation rather than persuasion. The consequences reach beyond activism into everyday perception. Individuals increasingly interpret events through group symbolism, anticipating offence or solidarity before evaluating facts. Public discourse fragments into parallel conversations, each coherent within its own frame yet resistant to external criteria. The shared world becomes a negotiated overlap of perspectives rather than a common reference point. Thus the passage from revolutionary certainty to identity pluralism reveals a deeper continuity: when confidence in rational universality erodes, society reorganises around belonging. Whether singular or multiple, the tribe becomes the cognitive anchor. The challenge for modern culture is not merely managing diversity but recovering a mode of judgment capable of addressing persons before categories, lest the search for protection transform permanently into the language of separation.

Sotirakopoulos, N. (2019) The Tribalist Mind: Identity Politics and Tribalism. London: Societas.

7. Error Fit Memoria

The Hunger to Be Seen: Recognition in the Age of Mass Selves

Francis Fukuyama, Identity: The Politics of Dignity, begins from an observation that the upheavals of the early twenty-first century cannot be understood solely through economics or institutions but through a change in what people believe themselves to be. For several decades the world appeared to move toward a predictable horizon. Political systems adopted similar forms, markets connected distant societies, and prosperity expanded unevenly but visibly. Yet stability concealed a transformation. The expansion of opportunity reorganised social life faster than meaning could follow it. Migration accelerated, work detached from place, families altered their internal hierarchies, and individuals encountered strangers constantly through screens and cities. The promise of freedom multiplied choices, but multiplied comparisons as well. The result was not calm but a pervasive unease: the suspicion that one's place had been lowered, ignored, or erased. Traditional political conflict once revolved around distribution. One side demanded greater equality of wealth, the other defended autonomy of property. The dispute concerned how much each person received from a shared economic system. But gradually the axis shifted. People did not merely ask for a larger portion of material goods; they demanded affirmation of their worth. The emotional intensity of these demands exceeded ordinary interest. Economic grievances became combustible when interpreted as humiliation. Losing employment was painful; losing respect was intolerable. The language of politics therefore changed from negotiation to accusation. Groups mobilised not as classes bargaining over resources but as identities seeking acknowledgement. This transformation can be understood only by reconsidering the human psyche. The common model treats individuals as rational actors pursuing advantage. Yet experience constantly contradicts this reduction. People sacrifice comfort for honour, risk safety for pride, and endure suffering for causes that bring no tangible reward. The desire at work is neither appetite nor calculation but a craving for esteem. Humans want their existence to be confirmed by others. They wish not merely to live but to matter. The denial of that confirmation generates anger deeper than poverty because it strikes at the sense of self. Ancient philosophy described this element as a distinct faculty: a spirited core that reacts to insult and glories in recognition. This faculty explains why individuals rebel even when materially secure and why humiliation can provoke political upheaval. A person may accept hardship but not contempt. Communities therefore become theatres in which esteem is distributed and contested. Titles, honours, and reputations function as visible signs that a life counts. When such signs appear unjustly allocated, resentment grows, not because inequality exists, but because the hierarchy appears morally wrong.

Modern societies attempted to solve this by universalising dignity. Earlier worlds reserved honour for warriors or aristocrats who risked themselves publicly. Equality overturned this logic by declaring that worth belongs to every individual simply by virtue of being human. Political rights became instruments through which this universal respect was expressed. Expanding citizenship, abolishing hereditary privilege, and recognising civil liberties all extended the circle of acknowledged persons. Each reform promised to end humiliation by ensuring that no one stood outside recognition. Yet the solution contained a paradox. Once

dignity becomes universal, it must be continually confirmed. Equality removes fixed ranks but introduces constant comparison. If everyone deserves respect, any perceived slight becomes injustice. Individuals therefore organise collectively to secure acknowledgement for characteristics they believe overlooked. The search for esteem shifts from personal honour to shared identity. People speak as members of nations, religions, genders, or communities because recognition requires visibility, and visibility requires categories. At this point political struggle changes character. Instead of negotiating interests, societies arbitrate recognition. Laws and symbols become battlegrounds because they declare whose experiences count. A marriage, a monument, a border, a curriculum—each signals public valuation. Conflict intensifies because compromise over respect feels like self-negation. One cannot partially affirm dignity. Either one's identity is recognised or denied. The intensity of contemporary disputes therefore reflects not irrationality but the logic of esteem. However, the pursuit of equal recognition contains a second tension. The demand to be treated as equal easily transforms into the desire to be acknowledged as superior. Groups seek reassurance that their traditions, beliefs, or suffering possess special significance. The line between equality and precedence blurs. Pride asks not only to be accepted but to be honoured. Where one community asserts primacy, another experiences exclusion, and the cycle of resentment continues. Modern communication magnifies this process. Visibility expands beyond local communities into global audiences. Every expression becomes performative because it addresses unknown observers whose approval validates identity. Individuals therefore curate themselves through statements, affiliations, and gestures that signal belonging. Recognition becomes measurable through attention. The social field turns into an arena where esteem circulates continuously, and politics adapts to this environment. Leaders succeed not by redistributing resources alone but by articulating wounded pride and promising restoration.

Economic change amplifies the dynamic. Wealth historically indicated status, but technological societies detach income from social honour. A person may possess comfort yet feel dispensable, replaced by automation or ignored by cultural narratives. Conversely, symbolic affirmation may compensate for material insecurity. Thus struggles that appear cultural often express displaced anxieties about position. Recognition substitutes for stability. Communities defend identity because it anchors meaning amid mobility. The psychology behind these movements does not imply insincerity. The craving for esteem is universal. People seek confirmation that their lives possess value, and they interpret political arrangements accordingly. When institutions appear indifferent, individuals interpret neutrality as erasure. They then organise collectively, translating private feelings into public claims. What emerges is a politics structured less by material scarcity than by perceived disrespect. Understanding this requires abandoning the assumption that reason and desire exhaust motivation. Human beings pursue acknowledgment as fervently as comfort. Honour, shame, pride, and resentment operate alongside interest. Societies therefore cannot be explained solely by incentives. They are theatres of recognition in which individuals attempt to see themselves reflected. Where that reflection fails, conflict follows. Modern identity emerged when individuals began to believe that their inner experience possessed higher authority than inherited roles. Previously one adjusted oneself to the world; now the world is expected to adjust to the self. This inversion transforms dignity from a social grant into a personal entitlement awaiting validation. The political consequence is perpetual renegotiation of norms because every person interprets authenticity differently. The resulting landscape appears unstable because recognition lacks final settlement. Extending respect to one group reveals another claiming exclusion. Equality becomes a horizon rather than an achievement. The expansion of dignity therefore produces continuous mobilisation. Instead of

concluding conflict, universal recognition multiplies it by awakening expectations previously unimaginable.

The contemporary condition can thus be read as the maturation of a long process. The universalisation of worth liberated individuals from fixed hierarchies but also dissolved shared standards for honour. Without a common measure, esteem fragments into competing narratives. Each seeks acknowledgement from institutions incapable of satisfying all simultaneously. Politics then oscillates between inclusion and resentment, between equality and distinction. To navigate such a world requires understanding that recognition cannot be eliminated from political life. Attempts to reduce human behaviour to calculation overlook the centrality of esteem. People do not merely want security; they want affirmation that their existence carries meaning. Institutions that ignore this dimension appear cold even when efficient. Conversely, movements that promise recognition inspire loyalty disproportionate to their practical achievements. The modern crisis is therefore not only economic or institutional but anthropological. A society that proclaims equal dignity must continuously enact it, yet no symbolic order can fully satisfy the demand. The struggle for acknowledgement persists because the self depends on others for confirmation while also seeking independence from them. Politics becomes the arena where this contradiction unfolds publicly. Recognition binds communities but also divides them. It enables solidarity among those who feel unseen yet provokes rivalry among groups competing for esteem. The challenge of the present age lies not in abolishing identity but in preventing recognition from collapsing into exclusion. Only by acknowledging the depth of this human need can political life move beyond cycles of humiliation and retaliation toward forms of coexistence where dignity does not require dominance.

Fukuyama, F. (2018) Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

The Therapeutic State: When Recognition Becomes Policy

Francis Fukuyama, Identity: The Politics of Dignity, frames the modern drama of equality as a story about how dignity moved from a privilege granted to the few into an entitlement claimed by the many, and how that victory quietly altered what liberal societies think they are for. In the older world, esteem belonged to narrow ranks: honour was reserved for those who risked themselves publicly, and the rest learned to live without the expectation of being celebrated. Modern liberal orders broke that arrangement by extending rights outward, treating more and more people as bearers of equal standing before the law. The expansion looks like a straightforward moral ascent: from property to universal suffrage, from inherited status to citizenship, from social hierarchy to equality of rights. Yet the same movement carries an internal mutation. Once dignity is declared universal, recognition becomes a permanent political task, because the demand no longer concerns what a person may do, but what a person is. Equality of rights begins to slide into a broader expectation: not merely to be protected from harm, but to be affirmed, encouraged, and psychologically secured.

This shift can be tracked through the way modern culture reimagined the inner self. Earlier religious horizons located dignity in moral agency, but moral agency was inseparable from discipline. Worth was connected to the struggle against impulses, the shaping of desire, the cultivation of restraint, and the acceptance of judgement. As the shared moral canopy

weakened, the ground of dignity moved. The inner life came to be interpreted less as the battlefield of sin and obedience and more as a reservoir of authenticity. The highest moral act was no longer self-command but self-expression. Society, once viewed as a school of character, increasingly appeared as an external force that suppresses the very thing it ought to recognise. The ideal liberal order therefore changes meaning. It is not simply a framework that prevents violence and protects speech; it becomes, in imagination and eventually in policy, an environment that facilitates self-actualisation, helping individuals become what they feel themselves to be.

The language of self-esteem crystallises this transformation. When a political culture claims that being human carries an innate worth that cannot be taken away, it is extending an older moral inheritance into a secular register. Yet the modern step is to treat this worth not as a metaphysical premise but as a psychological asset that can be strengthened, damaged, restored, or managed. The individual is asked to view feelings as sources of truth, not merely as states to be endured or tested. Identity becomes something located inside, unique, creative, and deserving of recognition regardless of comparative achievement. A person need not become worthy; worth is presumed to be already there, waiting to be acknowledged. Here the central contradiction surfaces. If dignity is intrinsic, judgement becomes suspicious. If everyone is worthy by default, the vocabulary that distinguishes better from worse seems hostile. Yet any society that intends to survive must distinguish destructive behaviour from honourable conduct. The inner self is not automatically benevolent. It can be cruel, dishonest, predatory, or simply indifferent. A culture that celebrates authenticity without criteria risks sanctifying impulse. And once impulse is sanctified, responsibility becomes difficult to teach, because responsibility begins where a person can feel shame, accept blame, and recognise that certain desires must be refused. The modern effort to distribute esteem universally therefore collides with the moral fact that not every act deserves praise. The demand that no one be judged meets the necessity that some actions must be condemned. The attempt to resolve this conflict often produces an unstable compromise: affirm everyone's worth while also insisting on virtues, but without being able to explain why virtues should bind the self if the self is sovereign. A list of admirable traits can be recited—honesty, compassion, discipline, courage—but the act of listing already reintroduces hierarchy. If character matters, then dignity cannot be purely intrinsic, because dignity becomes entangled with conduct. The modern culture of self-esteem wants both claims at once: that all people are equally worthy and that some ways of life are superior. The tension between equal recognition and deserved recognition becomes permanent.

The consequence is not merely philosophical confusion but institutional expansion. When dignity is interpreted as psychological well-being, the question arises: who is responsible for maintaining it? The older liberal answer treated the state as a referee: it protects liberties, secures order, provides basic services, and otherwise leaves individuals to pursue their own conceptions of good. Under the newer view, self-worth is shaped by recognition, and recognition is social, public, and therefore political. If public language and public policy can diminish or elevate self-esteem, then the state appears capable, even obligated, to participate in emotional repair. Liberal neutrality begins to look like neglect. Institutions become expected not only to guarantee rights, but to provide affirmation.

This is where the 'therapeutic' orientation enters as a cultural replacement for shared moral authority. When religious frameworks no longer organise meaning for large populations, therapy can occupy the empty space, not merely as a clinical practice but as an ethical atmosphere. The self is taught to look inward, to interpret distress as injury to identity, and to

seek healing through recognition and validation. The therapist replaces the priest not by offering salvation, but by offering well-being. The central aim is not holiness or virtue but a manipulable sense of feeling better, often without requiring an agreement about what the good life is. The individual becomes both patient and project. The therapeutic view changes how problems are classified. Behaviours once treated as deviance or sin become symptoms; responsibility becomes treatment; punishment becomes intervention. The state, following this sensibility, gradually develops a language of care that spreads through welfare policy, schooling, workplaces, and the large nonprofit machinery that often delivers public services. The logic is simple: if emotional health is crucial to functioning, and if functioning is a public matter, then emotional support becomes a legitimate domain of policy. The result is a soft enlargement of governance: not necessarily more coercion, but more management of inner life through counselling frameworks, protocols, and expert mediation. Once this sensibility becomes normal, it naturally migrates to education. Schools do not only transmit knowledge; they become sites of psychological formation. The role of the teacher shifts from instruction to emotional stewardship. The curriculum, once justified by truth, tradition, or excellence, begins to be defended by its effects on the student's psyche. A text is not merely something to understand; it is something that can wound, exclude, diminish, or validate. The justification for changing syllabi and canons therefore becomes therapeutic rather than intellectual: inclusion is defended not because it is truer or better, but because it affirms those who previously felt unseen. In this logic, representation becomes a form of care, and care becomes a political imperative.

This development illuminates a key transformation in identity politics. Liberal democracy originally promised equal recognition as formal rights: equal standing before law, equal protection, equal liberty. The newer demand is qualitative: recognition as self-esteem, the expectation that institutions will affirm the individual's value in a substantive way. Once this becomes standard, politics no longer concerns only what people are permitted to do, but how people are made to feel, and whether public life mirrors their sense of self. The struggle for dignity becomes a struggle over the distribution of validation. Yet this 'democratisation of dignity' carries an ironic reconvergence with collective identity. If dignity depends on recognition, individuals may seek recognition not primarily as distinct persons but as members of categories whose visibility can be demanded. The self asks to be affirmed through sameness: through race, gender, culture, sexuality, ancestry, memory. Liberal individualism, having expanded the circle of rights, finds itself pulled toward group-based recognition, because groups provide clearer objects for public acknowledgement than individual interiority does. The state can more easily recognise categories than souls. The result is a politics in which individual dignity is pursued through collective identity, and the language of universal citizenship is reconfigured into a contest over which groups receive the most explicit affirmation. This is the hinge where the modern story turns. A political order built to protect individuals discovers that many individuals want more than protection. They want public confirmation that their inner lives are real, valuable, and honoured. When institutions attempt to provide that confirmation, they do so by adopting therapeutic languages and group markers that are legible, administrable, and enforceable. Dignity becomes policy, recognition becomes infrastructure, and the liberal promise quietly transforms: from equal rights under law to the management of esteem in a society where being unseen feels like being denied existence.

Francis Fukuyama, Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment.

The identity question did not arrive as a single doctrine or slogan; it arrived as a change in how people learned to experience themselves and judge their societies. In the middle of the twentieth century, liberal democracies increasingly understood dignity as something owed to the person as person, not to the person as role, birth, or inherited station. Yet the lived reality of social life rarely matches the abstract promise of equal standing. Even when law declares equality, everyday perception continues to sort people into categories, to attach expectations to bodies, accents, faiths, and origins, and to treat group membership as a shorthand for worth. The great movements that surged in the 1960s can be read as the collision between the universal language of rights and the stubborn, ordinary practice of group judgement. They were not only struggles over access, policy, or representation; they were struggles over recognition, visibility, and the repair of psychic injury produced by disrespect, dismissal, or erasure. In that sense, the political became personal in a new way, because personal esteem began to depend on the public status of the group with which one's life was intertwined. A self could not be fully secure if its social mirror consistently returned contempt.One can see the shift in the moral grammar of protest. Earlier liberal struggles often pressed for inclusion into existing norms: treat people the same, open the gates, let the law operate without prejudice. But alongside the demand for equal treatment there arose a second strategy, which slowly became dominant: do not merely include the excluded as if they were copies of the majority; instead recognise the distinctiveness created by a distinct history and insist that the public world adjust its categories. The move from identity to identities begins precisely here. Equality, once understood mainly as equal standing under shared rules, began to be interpreted as the public affirmation of difference, and difference was increasingly grounded in experience that outsiders were said to be unable to grasp. A politics that started with universal aspiration began to multiply into a set of separate claims, each tied to a particular story of injury, pride, and survival. The notion of 'lived experience' provided the bridge. Experience in the older sense implies something transmissible: an account that can be tested, debated, compared, and shared across boundaries. Lived experience, by contrast, points to the interior texture of life, to the way events land in the body and are remembered by the psyche, to the intimacy of fear, humiliation, vulnerability, and exclusion. It is not that lived experience is unreal; rather, it is described as irreducible, as something that resists translation into common language. Once that idea becomes persuasive, political argument changes its centre of gravity. The question shifts from 'Is the claim true?' to 'Who has the standing to speak?' and from 'Which reasons are strongest?' to 'Which injuries are deepest?' In such a setting, identity becomes a form of epistemology: what a person can know, and what a person is allowed to say, is measured by where that person is positioned in the moral cartography of groups. The promise of recognition, which once aimed at integrating citizens into a shared public world, begins to pull in the opposite direction, towards a patchwork of moral jurisdictions.

Modernisation accelerates this multiplication. A complex division of labour, high mobility, and plural urban life dissolve the old village-like unity of shared custom. At the same time, new media intensify the search for similarity, allowing people separated by geography to form communities of affinity, grievance, and taste. The paradox is that connectivity can increase fragmentation: one finds one's people more easily, and therefore feels less need to translate one's life into a language that strangers can recognise. The proliferation of identities begins to resemble the proliferation of online micro-publics: each group sustains its own narratives, its

own terms of respect and insult, its own symbols of belonging, and its own boundaries of acceptable speech. This is not merely a technological effect. It follows from a deeper shift in the moral imagination of liberal democracies, in which dignity becomes increasingly tied not only to legal rights but to social esteem, and social esteem becomes increasingly tied to psychological well-being. Here the therapeutic turn matters. When institutions absorb the mission of protecting self-worth, they become sensitive to the ways language, curriculum, and social norms can be experienced as harm. The public sphere is no longer simply a venue for competing arguments; it is also interpreted as a space of potential injury. Under this sensibility, cultural recognition becomes a political good in itself, because recognition is treated as the condition of personal flourishing. To be unseen is not only a sociological fact; it is a psychic wound. To be misnamed is not only an error; it is an assault on dignity. The demand for inclusion therefore becomes a demand for a certain kind of speech, a certain kind of representation, a certain kind of institutional acknowledgement, because these are taken to be instruments of repair. But the same mechanism contains an instability. When dignity is tied to subjective experience, conflict becomes harder to negotiate. Economic disputes can be bargained over; one can trade one policy for another, one concession for another. Recognition disputes are experienced as non-negotiable because they touch the meaning of the self. If the claim is ‘I must be seen as fully equal’, compromise looks like humiliation. If the claim is ‘My story cannot be understood by outsiders’, deliberation looks like intrusion. If the claim is ‘Certain words deny my existence’, free speech looks like cruelty. A liberal culture of argument therefore meets a new kind of demand: not simply to protect citizens from violence or discrimination, but to protect citizens from the destabilisation of their inner self by public discourse.

At the same time, the left’s turn toward proliferating identities was not purely a moral fashion; it was also a political adaptation. As the twentieth century progressed, large-scale programmes aimed at remaking the economy ran into hard limits: the discrediting of revolutionary projects, fiscal constraint, administrative failure, and a broader scepticism toward state power. In that vacuum, cultural struggle offered a substitute arena where victories were achievable and symbolic change was visible. One can change curricula more easily than labour markets; one can police language more easily than restructure production. The focus on recognition could therefore expand precisely because the struggle over redistribution became more difficult, and because the most prominent sites of activism were increasingly elite institutions whose tools were symbolic rather than economic. This produced a new tension inside progressive politics. The coalition of groups held together by shared opposition to older hierarchies is also held apart by the very logic of lived experience: if each group’s knowledge is uniquely grounded, the coalition is always at risk of fracture. Moreover, the constant refinement of identity categories creates a politics of internal competition, in which moral status is tied to the degree of marginalisation, and where solidarity can be replaced by ranking. Under these conditions, speech becomes a minefield not because people are more evil than before, but because the social meaning of words is tied to dignity claims that are felt to be existential. What begins as sensitivity can harden into a system of informal prohibitions whose boundaries shift quickly and unevenly. The result is not only self-censorship; it is a change in the character of public reason. Arguments are increasingly evaluated as signals of allegiance or disrespect rather than as contributions to a shared search for truth. The most fateful development, however, is the mirroring effect. A politics that organises recognition around group identities does not remain confined to groups historically marked as marginalised. Once the language of victimhood, invisibility, and injury becomes the dominant currency, it becomes available to everyone. The

right's adoption of identity framing follows a simple pattern: if dignity is the prize, and if dignity is distributed through recognition of group suffering, then any constituency that feels disdained by elites can recast itself as an oppressed identity. The claim is no longer merely that policy has failed, but that one's way of life is mocked, one's values are treated as retrograde, one's speech is policed, and one's existence is rendered culturally illegitimate. In this way, identity politics does not remain the property of those seeking entry into the house of liberal equality; it becomes a general mode of political perception across the spectrum.

That mirroring also weaponises the drama of authenticity. When public speech is surrounded by moral landmines, the person who appears to ignore them can be read as courageous, even when what is being said is cruel, vulgar, or dishonest. A certain type of supporter does not endorse every transgression; the attraction is the transgression itself as proof of freedom from elite permission. The result is a new politics of performative defiance, where the pleasure of offending becomes a badge of belonging, and where contempt for 'correct' speech becomes a substitute for coherent programmes of reform. The deeper philosophical problem is that liberal democracies require a shared world of translation. They can tolerate pluralism only if diverse lives can be rendered into common reasons, if injuries can be acknowledged without turning into permanent moral borders, and if disagreement can occur without being experienced as annihilation. The proliferation of identities challenges this requirement by insisting that the self is grounded in experiences that cannot be made common. Yet a society cannot act collectively if its citizens cannot speak across difference, cannot build a shared account of reality, and cannot accept that persuasion sometimes requires revising the self's first interpretation of its own story. This is why the problem is not identity as such, but identity understood as destiny, identity as epistemic closure, identity as non-negotiable status, and identity as a permanent claim upon public speech. A democratic culture can and must recognise injustices that attach to group membership; it must correct inherited exclusions; it must protect people from discrimination and violence. But it must also prevent recognition from becoming a machine that endlessly multiplies untranslatable worlds. The task is to build larger forms of belonging that neither erase difference nor absolutise it, to cultivate a civic identity capacious enough to include varied histories without forcing politics to become a zero-sum struggle for moral visibility. Without such integrative forms, dignity becomes a battlefield of competing humiliations, and the public sphere becomes an arena where speech is either ritual reassurance or ritual provocation, with fewer and fewer places left for the slow work of common reason.

Fukuyama, F. (2018) Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

8. Urbs Se Cognoscit

Democracy in Pieces: The New Tribalism

Francis Fukuyama, in the essay 'Against Identity Politics' adapted from Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment, frames the present as a historical reversal: a period that expanded democracy and prosperity across the late twentieth century, then stumbled into disillusionment, polarisation, and a renewed appetite for strong boundaries. The surface story is familiar. Many countries grew richer, more connected, and formally more democratic, while poverty fell and markets widened. Yet beneath this broad improvement, large numbers of

people experienced the period as a downgrade of status and a thinning of recognition. What was celebrated as openness felt, to many, like exposure; what was praised as flexibility felt like dispossession. The moral atmosphere shifted. Politics ceased to revolve primarily around arguments over production and distribution and began to revolve around the struggle to be seen. The debate over 'who gets what' gave way to the deeper, more combustible question of 'who counts'. The text insists that this shift is not an incidental cultural mood but a reorganisation of political motivation. Material interests matter, but humans are not machines of appetite alone. People carry a demand that is more intimate than income and more stubborn than policy: the need for dignity, recognition, and visible worth. In that demand lies the key to the contemporary crisis. When political energy gathers around recognition, the centre of gravity moves from class to identity, from bargaining to moral drama, from arguments over means to battles over meaning. The world can become wealthier and still feel humiliated. A society can become more equal in law and still feel contemptuous in practice. The contradiction does not disappear because it is not a simple contradiction between numbers but a contradiction between human self-understanding and the conditions that organise it. The argument begins with global transformation but refuses to stay there. Globalisation, technological change, and the reordering of labour markets dislocated older forms of work and authority. Manufacturing migrated, service work expanded, machines replaced routine labour, and the meaning of 'skill' hardened into credentials that divided the population into winners and losers. These changes were not only economic. They re-scripted the dignity structure of everyday life. When a role disappears, a person does not only lose wages; a person loses a place in the moral order. Work has always been more than employment. It is a public sign that one's effort matters, that one contributes, that one belongs. When whole regions and classes discover that their labour is no longer honoured, the injury becomes existential. Resentment grows not merely from poverty but from invisibility, from the feeling that a life once regarded as normal has become culturally illegible. This is why economic decline is often experienced as an identity crisis: it is not only a fall in resources but a fall in standing. The text names a deeper anthropology to explain this. A human being contains a desire that classical philosophy treated as distinct from calculation and appetite: an insistence on honour. Politics, in this view, is never purely an argument over interests; it is a theatre of status. People want to be recognised, sometimes as equal, sometimes as superior. Two drives appear: the wish to be acknowledged as no less than others, and the wish to be acknowledged as more. Modern democracy can be read as the historical victory of equal recognition over the old systems that reserved dignity for elites. Yet the triumph is incomplete, because equal rights do not eliminate unequal outcomes, and legal equality does not remove social disdain. Modern societies produce new hierarchies even as they proclaim equality. The demand for dignity therefore persists, but it changes its form. It migrates into new movements and new languages. It also returns in uglier forms when people believe recognition is being distributed unjustly. Here the analysis becomes sharp: identity politics is presented not as a fashionable obsession but as a moral technology for converting humiliation into mobilisation. A group believes it has been disrespected; politics becomes the struggle to force acknowledgement. In authoritarian contexts, leaders have long used humiliation narratives, promising restoration. The text argues that democracies have entered the same emotional logic. Movements arise from real harms, but they also widen into a total frame through which everything is interpreted. A campaign begins with a concrete injustice and becomes a lens for reading the entire society. The moral claim is powerful: a life has been made unsafe, a person has been rendered invisible, a community has been treated as less than human. Such claims are not marginal; they reorganise public attention. The moral drama becomes the core of politics.

The left, in this account, shifted from the universal language of class and redistribution toward a politics organised around a widening set of marginalised identities. This shift is not dismissed as mere distraction. It is described as understandable and, in many cases, necessary. The lived experience of exclusion is real; outsiders often do not see the harm they cause; cultural norms can hide violence behind routine. Recognition politics can produce genuine reform: institutions change when forced to look at what they have normalised. Yet the text warns that a politics that focuses primarily on cultural recognition can drift away from the difficult work of structural reform, because cultural conflict is easier to wage than economic reconstruction. It is easier to re-police language than to rebuild labour markets. It is easier to revise curricula than to raise incomes. It is easier to celebrate representation at the top than to alter the distribution of security at the bottom. The danger is not that recognition claims are false but that they can become a substitute for policies that would reduce the underlying drivers of humiliation. When the pursuit of dignity is reduced to symbolic victories, resentment does not disappear; it is merely redistributed. The argument then turns to a more troubling outcome: the migration of identity politics from left to right. When one side defines politics as recognition of group dignity, the other side eventually learns the same grammar. Those who feel mocked by elites, displaced by social change, or treated as culturally backward begin to narrate themselves as victims. The old majority learns to speak the language of marginalisation. A dominant group can experience itself as besieged. This is the crucial pivot. The contemporary right, in this reading, did not defeat identity politics; it adopted it. It formed a counter-identity built around the claim that the nation's 'real' people are no longer recognised in their own land. The moral charge is familiar: betrayal by cosmopolitan elites, loss of home to outsiders, erosion of respect. This narrative is politically effective because it offers belonging as consolation and superiority as remedy. It converts economic confusion into moral clarity: the person is not failing; the person is being wronged. The rise of transgressive figures can then be understood as a reaction to perceived speech policing. If public discourse feels like a field of hidden tripwires, the one who steps on them without apology can appear 'authentic'. Yet the argument insists that this is not a return to older conservative politics. It is a new form of recognition struggle, one that can slide toward explicit racial or religious nationalism, and in extreme cases toward fantasies of restoration through exclusion. The result is a public sphere increasingly unable to deliberate. Identity conflict is structurally difficult to compromise because it is experienced as existential. Economic conflict allows bargaining: percentages, programs, distributions. Identity conflict often feels binary: either one is recognised or one is erased. When politics becomes a series of recognition wars, society fractures into segments that speak primarily to themselves. Deliberation becomes harder because disagreement is read not as error but as insult. The text identifies a threat to democratic discourse here: sincerity replaces argument, and offence becomes a veto. The inner world of experience gains moral priority over the shared world of reasons. This does not mean that experience is irrelevant; it means that when experience is treated as unchallengeable, politics becomes a competition of wounds. A democracy can survive disagreement; it struggles to survive mutual illegibility. What, then, is the remedy? The proposal is not to abolish identity, because modern humans cannot live without it. Identity is not a defect but a structure of selfhood. People will continue to seek authentic recognition, and societies must protect those who are harmed or excluded. The remedy is rather to build larger identities capable of integrating diversity without erasing difference. The text calls for a form of national identity grounded in shared principles rather than ethnicity or religion, an identity that invites newcomers into a common civic narrative while demanding commitment to foundational norms. This is a delicate position because it resists two temptations at once: the

temptation to define the nation as blood, and the temptation to treat the nation as nothing but a catalogue of differences. A viable democracy needs a story that can be shared, not because it is perfect, but because without some common frame, collective action dissolves. This integrative project requires addressing concrete injustices that generate recognition demands, but it also requires institutions that cultivate civic belonging: education that teaches common principles, practices that create shared sacrifice, and citizenship regimes that do not privilege ancestry while also insisting on participation. The text's underlying philosophical claim is that the politics of the future will be decided by how societies manage the tension between universal dignity and particular recognition. If dignity is reduced to group rivalry, democracy becomes a battlefield of identities. If dignity is expanded into an integrative frame, identity becomes not a weapon but a bond. Modern societies cannot escape recognition. They can only decide whether recognition will be distributed in ways that multiply enemies or in ways that create citizens.

Fukuyama, F. (2018) 'Against Identity Politics', Foreign Affairs, 97(5), pp. 90–114.

The Empire Without a Face: Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism

Paul James, in Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism from Bringing Theory Back In: Towards a Theory of Abstract Community, begins from a seemingly trivial image: a businessman and tribal warriors sharing a fire beneath the slogan promising universal communication. The scene appears reassuring. Technology speaks every language. Difference dissolves into interface. Yet the comfort is deceptive, because the promise of universal connection simultaneously intensifies the experience of separation. The image reveals the paradox of the contemporary world: humanity has never been more connected, yet never more aware of distance. Communication expands while belonging fragments. The global sphere claims inclusivity but continuously produces outsiders. The world becomes unified only by the shared experience of mediation. The global order does not abolish the tribe; it multiplies its anxieties.

The modern imagination once believed that history progressed from primitive bonds to rational universality. Kinship would yield to citizenship, and citizenship to humanity. Instead, the process unfolded differently. The expansion of networks did not dissolve older attachments but reconfigured them. Identity moved upward into abstraction while simultaneously burrowing downward into memory. People began to inhabit multiple scales of belonging at once: the local, the national, and the planetary. Each level intensified the others. The more individuals entered universal systems of exchange and communication, the more urgently they sought concrete markers of difference. Globalization therefore produced not a post-identity world but a competitive ecology of identities. The tribe returned not as relic but as reaction to distance. Advertising became the mythology of this transformation. Corporate imagery depicted the planet as frictionless conversation, yet the viewer sensed the absence behind the promise. The map flattened geography while thickening symbolic borders. The universal language of systems required the persistence of cultural translation. The slogan announcing universal understanding depended on the assumption that misunderstanding remained fundamental. Technology's promise of immediacy revealed the depth of mediation. The world was unified only as representation. In such a condition, cultural symbols began to circulate independently of origin. Historical figures, national myths and ancestral signs detached from place and reappeared in new contexts. A cinematic hero could become a national ancestor; a foreign actor could embody authentic heritage; a regional costume could be adopted by distant political movements. Tradition ceased to be inheritance and became selection. Communities constructed continuity

from circulating images rather than lived memory. Identity transformed into a curated archive of available pasts.

This did not mean that belonging became artificial. On the contrary, it became more intense precisely because it was constructed. When identity must be chosen, it must be defended. The more mediated community becomes, the more emotionally real it feels. Modern belonging therefore oscillates between fiction and devotion. A person may know a tradition is assembled and still experience it as sacred. Authenticity migrates from origin to commitment. The same logic appears in political movements. Groups separated by geography adopt shared symbols and narratives through mediated channels, forming imagined kinship across distance. A regional rebellion may borrow ancient imagery from another continent. A local struggle frames itself through cinematic myth. Global circulation provides the materials through which particularism is rebuilt. The universal network becomes the infrastructure of local passion. This reveals a central misunderstanding of modern discourse: globalism, nationalism and tribalism are not successive stages but overlapping structures. They coexist because each addresses a different dimension of social existence. The tribe answers the need for immediate recognition. The nation answers the need for shared narrative across strangers. The globe answers the need for coordination among strangers without narrative. None replaces the others. Instead, history layers them. The contemporary individual therefore lives simultaneously in kinship, citizenship and system. To understand this layering, one must examine the transformation of practices rather than ideas. Communication, exchange and production reorganize how communities imagine themselves. Oral reciprocity creates presence-based belonging. Writing produces continuity across absence. Money abstracts obligation beyond relationship. Clocks detach action from natural cycles. Digital networks remove interaction from location. Each step increases abstraction while preserving earlier forms within it. A person still greets neighbors face-to-face, honors national ceremonies and participates in global markets within the same day. Abstraction does not erase embodiment but overlays it. Earlier forms remain as emotional anchors within larger systems. The tribe persists inside the nation, the nation inside the globe. Conflict emerges when these levels demand incompatible loyalties. The individual becomes a junction of scales. Anxiety arises not from difference but from simultaneity.

Modern debates often treat the nation as disappearing under globalization, yet its instability results from expansion rather than disappearance. The nation historically unified territory, authority and identity. Global networks separate these elements. Authority moves to supranational systems, economy to transnational markets, identity to cultural memory. The nation survives as narrative while losing structural monopoly. Its crisis is therefore ontological rather than political: it still explains belonging but no longer organizes reality. At the same time, tribal forms intensify because they provide experiential certainty within abstract life. Immediate communities promise recognition that large systems cannot supply. Yet they too transform. Contemporary tribes are less genealogical than symbolic. They form through affinity, shared narrative and mediated ritual. Belonging becomes performative rather than inherited. The global system, meanwhile, depends on abstraction. It operates through standardized protocols indifferent to cultural meaning. It does not require shared belief, only shared procedures. Its universality lies in technical compatibility rather than moral consensus. Yet because humans seek meaning, they interpret these procedures through identity. A neutral network becomes culturally charged. Every universal system becomes a stage for particular interpretation. This tension explains modern violence and solidarity alike. Conflicts framed as ancient hatreds often arise within modern communication environments. Hostility spreads through networks that also

enable cooperation. The same technologies that coordinate humanitarian action coordinate destruction. Global systems amplify both empathy and antagonism because they intensify awareness of difference. Understanding the present therefore requires a theory of social form rather than isolated phenomena. One cannot explain nationalism solely by national history, nor globalization solely by economic expansion. Each emerges from transformations in communication, exchange and temporality. As interaction becomes less dependent on presence, communities become more dependent on narrative. As exchange becomes abstract, trust shifts from familiarity to symbol. As time becomes standardized, memory becomes curated. Social life increasingly depends on representations that organize perception across distance.

The contemporary condition is thus neither fragmentation nor unity but structured multiplicity. People inhabit layered realities whose logics conflict yet interlock. The local offers intimacy without scale. The national offers narrative without proximity. The global offers coordination without belonging. Human existence oscillates among these modes, seeking balance yet never achieving synthesis. Ethically, the challenge is not to reject abstraction but to prevent its domination. Global systems enable cooperation unimaginable in earlier eras, yet they risk reducing relations to procedures. Local attachments preserve meaning but risk exclusion. National narratives sustain solidarity but risk mythologizing difference. The task is to cultivate forms of association that preserve embodied reciprocity within abstract coordination. The future therefore depends on reflexive awareness of scale. Communities must learn to operate across levels without collapsing them. The tribe should not pretend to govern the globe, nor the globe erase the tribe. Political imagination must recognize that belonging has degrees rather than a single horizon. Only by acknowledging this layered structure can societies navigate the contradictions of modern life. The world has not moved beyond older forms of association. It has multiplied them within a single experience. Humanity now lives in an empire without a face: a planetary system that organizes existence while remaining emotionally empty. Into this emptiness people project nations and tribes, stories and ancestors, symbols and rituals. The more abstract the world becomes, the more intensely humans seek presence within it. Globalization therefore does not end identity. It makes identity necessary.

Paul James (2006) Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism: Bringing Theory Back In, Towards a Theory of Abstract Community, Volume 2 (London: SAGE Publications).

The Fractured Whole: Belonging Across Social Scales

Paul James in Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism from Bringing Theory Back In: Towards a Theory of Abstract Community describes the present as a period in which social relations stretch outward and collapse inward at the same time. The world expands while communities tighten. Systems integrate while identities divide. This is not a paradox but a structural condition of contemporary life. The same forces that connect the planet reorganize belonging into sharper forms. Global networks do not dissolve locality; they provoke it. Modern culture narrates this tension as a clash between past and future. One image shows seamless technological progress, a world of commerce, mobility and frictionless exchange. Another image shows the return of blood ties, memory and conflict. Yet both images describe the same reality from different scales. The planetary order requires abstraction, but humans require recognition. When relations become mediated across distance, individuals seek immediacy in smaller circles. The more the world becomes accessible, the more belonging becomes selective. Popular imagination stages this contradiction constantly. Stories about the future depict hyper-connected cities alongside

neo-medieval enclaves. Individuals live inside planetary systems while forming intimate enclaves for meaning. The village does not disappear; it becomes symbolic. The global village therefore never truly resembles a village. It resembles a network that requires continuous local translation. Institutions respond to this pressure by simulating community. Corporations promise neighbourhood belonging while operating planetary infrastructures. Governments speak the language of cohesion while reorganizing populations into mobile labour. Cities brand themselves as local identities inside global markets. Every large structure must now present a human face, because scale alone cannot produce loyalty.

This dual movement produces a peculiar language. The rhetoric of universality borrows the vocabulary of intimacy. Systems describe users as neighbours, customers as friends, and markets as communities. Such language reveals a deficit. The global order depends on emotional forms it cannot generate internally. It therefore imports the imagery of locality while maintaining structural distance. Attempts to capture this process often name it without explaining it. Words describing simultaneous expansion and localization circulate as if they solved the problem they describe. Yet naming a condition is not understanding it. The real transformation lies deeper in everyday practices. Communication, exchange and production reshape how people experience time, space and the body. When interaction detaches from physical presence, relationships reorganize around representation. Memory becomes stored externally, coordination becomes procedural, and knowledge becomes distributed across systems. Social life therefore operates on layered grounds. Beneath institutions lie forms of life: habits, rituals, memories and embodied gestures. These do not disappear under rational organization. They become the background upon which rationality operates. The difficulty of contemporary theory lies in holding both levels at once: the patterned structure and the lived texture. One cannot reduce experience to discourse, nor dissolve structure into narrative. The present requires a method that connects abstraction to embodiment. The question of political belonging illustrates this difficulty. Communities endure beyond individual lifetimes. A collective persists even as its members die. The continuity of a people cannot be explained solely by the presence of its participants. It depends on transmitted symbols, shared memory and institutional repetition. A community lives not biologically but relationally. Modern states resolved this puzzle by merging polity and community into a single image. The nation became both administrative structure and emotional home. For a time this fusion appeared natural. Society and state seemed identical. Only when global processes loosened this unity did its artificiality become visible. Political authority, economic exchange and cultural belonging separated into different scales. The state governed territory, markets crossed borders, and identity followed memory.

The reaction to this discovery moved between extremes. Some concluded that collective belonging was entirely invented. Others insisted it remained natural. Both positions missed the hybrid nature of collective identity. A nation exists as an abstraction composed of strangers yet experienced as intimate familiarity. It is neither illusion nor organism but an abstract community: a structure sustained by shared categories of time, space and embodied similarity. People imagine continuity through history, territory and ancestry even while knowing the imagination is mediated. Moments of crisis reveal this mechanism. A vast population suddenly experiences itself as a single body. Symbols condense millions into one figure. The number of individuals matters less than the sense of togetherness. Representation creates presence. The abstract becomes palpable. The nation is therefore reproduced daily through shared recognition rather than physical interaction. At a deeper level lie more immediate forms of belonging.

Communities organized around face-to-face recognition persist even within large societies. They are not remnants of the past but conditions of perception. Humans grasp identity first through encounter. Direct reciprocity, shared memory and embodied placement anchor meaning. These relations may be biological or symbolic, inherited or chosen, but they operate through presence rather than representation. Confusion arises when every intense group is labeled a tribe. Not all close networks share the same structure. Some are temporary alliances; others are enduring communities organized by genealogical logic. The distinction matters because different forms of belonging create different obligations. Immediate communities bind through participation, not merely affiliation. They organize knowledge through narrative, authority through recognition and exchange through reciprocity.

Modernity did not erase such formations but transformed them. Some expanded into larger political identities; others fragmented into symbolic affiliations. In certain contexts they became instruments of nation building. In others they survived as dispersed memories. A lineage could become a cultural sign rather than a living community. The name remains while the structure changes. Contemporary culture produces yet another variation: simulated immediacy. People adopt the language and symbols of intimate belonging without its structural depth. Consumer practices imitate ancestral bonds. Style substitutes genealogy. Groups form around shared aesthetics, shared taste or shared opposition. These resemble communities but lack continuity across generations. They are identities of synchronization rather than inheritance. Nevertheless, such formations reveal a persistent desire. Individuals seek embodied meaning inside abstract systems. They recreate closeness where scale prevents it. Even commodified rituals answer a real need. The search for authenticity signals the limits of disembodied life. The present world therefore contains multiple ontologies of belonging. Face-to-face communities organize identity through presence. Nations organize it through narrative. Global systems organize it through procedure. Each layer overlaps the others. None abolishes the rest. Conflicts arise when one level claims total authority over the others.

Understanding contemporary tensions requires abandoning linear history. Humanity has not moved from tribe to nation to globe. Instead, these forms coexist within a single social formation. The global expands coordination, the national sustains imagination, and the local provides recognition. Social stability depends on negotiating their interaction rather than eliminating any of them. The central problem of the age is thus not fragmentation but misalignment. Institutions operate globally while emotions operate locally. Politics speaks nationally while economies function transnationally. Individuals must translate between incompatible scales daily. Anxiety emerges from this constant translation. To respond, theory must reconnect structure and experience. Social life is neither pure system nor pure narrative but patterned connection. By tracing how practices shape perception, one can see how abstraction grows without severing embodiment. The task is not to choose between universality and particularity but to understand their mutual dependence. The world is not breaking apart nor fully unifying. It is tightening into a complex whole whose parts pull in different directions. Only by recognizing this layered reality can one understand why integration intensifies identity, why distance produces intimacy, and why the more universal the world becomes, the more urgently people ask who belongs within it.

Captured Movements: Power Without Representation

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò in Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else) reconstructs a recurring political pattern: struggles born from collective need

are redirected by those best positioned within them. The phenomenon is not accidental corruption but structural gravity. Wherever resources, prestige, or access concentrate, interpretation follows. The story begins with a simple observation. Groups fight for liberation, yet the outcomes frequently benefit a narrow layer inside the group more than the group itself. A movement speaks the language of emancipation while reorganising opportunity upward. What appears as representation becomes filtration. The political voice does not disappear; it is translated into a dialect intelligible primarily to those already empowered. This translation produces a world in which inequality is opposed rhetorically while reproduced institutionally. The logic is subtle. The advantaged do not need to consciously betray collective goals. They only need to interpret them from the standpoint of their own position. The distance between position and perspective ensures that a partial interest appears universal. The phenomenon can be seen whenever leadership becomes separated from lived vulnerability. The most articulate speakers come to stand in for those with the least voice, yet their experience differs precisely because they have gained visibility. They negotiate recognition inside institutions rather than survival outside them. Gradually, problems shift from material deprivation to symbolic standing. The agenda changes because the interpreters change. This pattern is not confined to any one community. It appears wherever hierarchy exists. Political projects promise transformation but produce accommodation. The elite member becomes mediator between structure and population, and mediation stabilises the structure. The radical demand is reformulated as access rather than alteration. The language of liberation survives while the horizon narrows. The group's image replaces the group's condition. A new mythology develops: improvement will come through representation, consumption, or recognition rather than structural change. The myth persists because it benefits those who circulate it. A small stratum gains market advantage, professional legitimacy, or institutional authority by presenting itself as interpreter of collective aspiration. The struggle becomes career. This does not mean the aspirations are false; it means their articulation is filtered. The problem becomes clearest when symbolic victories multiply while material conditions stagnate. The movement wins presence in media, leadership positions, and professional spaces, yet the majority remains exposed to the same vulnerabilities. The distance between visibility and security widens. The paradox emerges: success at the top coincides with stagnation below. Political energy, redirected into prestige, loses capacity for transformation. The phenomenon extends beyond social movements into governance itself. Democratic systems promise that authority flows upward from the many. In practice, decision-making migrates toward remote arenas: expert committees, financial institutions, managerial networks, and global bureaucracies. Representation becomes formal while influence becomes technical. Citizens vote, yet policy is shaped by those fluent in specialised languages. Public interest becomes translated into solvable administrative problems, and solvable problems favour existing arrangements. This process does not abolish democracy; it hollows it. Legitimacy remains while control shifts. The result is a peculiar condition: accountability without agency. People are addressed as participants but function as spectators.

Power concentrates not because conspiracy prevails but because coordination requires knowledge unevenly distributed. Those who command knowledge command outcomes. The same mechanism operates in economic life. Corporations reorganise production in the name of efficiency while concentrating decision power in managerial and financial elites. Public functions are outsourced into private frameworks that maintain the appearance of service while redistributing risk downward. Attention itself becomes an asset governed by platforms whose incentives reward division and outrage. The collective conversation is shaped by invisible

priorities, and shared reality fragments into monetised engagement. At the global level, institutions claim neutrality while structuring entire national economies. Loans arrive with conditions, and policy becomes a prerequisite for survival. The population experiences governance as inevitability rather than decision. Here elite capture appears most clearly: decisions determining everyday life occur outside the reach of those affected. The pattern repeats at smaller scales. Academic disciplines born from grassroots demands become professionalised fields administered by bureaucracies. Radical traditions become respectable specialisations. The conflict that produced them is archived as knowledge while its urgency fades. Similarly, labour movements, feminist struggles, and queer activism often migrate from disruptive challenge to institutional inclusion. Inclusion changes individual lives but can leave structural relations intact. The original conflict is remembered ceremonially rather than lived politically. What explains this persistence? The answer lies in asymmetry of capacity. Participation requires time, education, and security. Those possessing these resources inevitably shape collective agendas. Their experience becomes normative not through malice but through availability. They attend meetings, write proposals, negotiate policy, and therefore define priorities. The majority remains symbolically present yet practically absent. Over time, coordination gravitates toward what elites share with one another rather than what they share with the population. The project narrows because cooperation is easier among the similarly situated. Elite capture therefore expresses a fundamental tension of organisation: any effort requiring representation risks substitution. A spokesperson must interpret, and interpretation privileges perspective. The danger intensifies when representation confers benefits. Authority becomes desirable, and preservation of role competes with transformation of conditions. Movements stabilise around maintaining influence rather than eliminating the need for it. The critique of identity politics often misidentifies the problem. The issue is not that attention to injustice is misguided but that any political language can be appropriated by unequal structures. The same dynamic affects markets, governance, activism, and culture. The powerful translate universal claims into manageable reforms aligned with their own position. What begins as emancipation becomes management.

Recognising this pattern shifts the question from which politics is captured to how capture operates. It operates wherever unequal access to resources intersects with collective aspiration. Public goods—wealth, knowledge, legitimacy—are distributed through channels shaped by advantage. Even moral language becomes infrastructure. Values circulate through institutions and therefore acquire institutional bias. The captured project still speaks sincerely but no longer speaks comprehensively. The consequences accumulate slowly. Citizens lose faith not because ideals fail but because outcomes diverge from promises. Disillusionment spreads, and cynicism replaces engagement. Yet the solution cannot be abandonment of organisation, for collective life requires coordination. The task becomes designing structures resistant to substitution: mechanisms that reconnect decision with consequence and interpretation with experience. Without such effort, every emancipatory project risks reproducing hierarchy in new vocabulary. The lesson is neither despair nor purity but vigilance. Power does not merely oppose movements; it inhabits them. Any politics seeking justice must therefore confront not only external domination but internal stratification. Liberation requires attention not only to who speaks against injustice but to who benefits from speaking for it.

Táíwò, O. (2022) Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else). Chicago: Haymarket Books.

9. Intervallum Silentii Perfecti

Tribal Speech: Democracy Without Common Ground

Colleen Elizabeth Kelley's Democratic Disunity: Rhetorical Tribalism in 2020 frames contemporary political conflict as a problem of rhetorical form as much as a problem of policy, suggesting that civic life is increasingly organised by styles of speaking that sort people into camps before any argument is even heard. The crucial claim is not simply that polarisation exists, but that polarisation has become a habitual mode of address: a way of speaking that anticipates enemies, flatters allies, and treats persuasion as betrayal. When this happens, democratic life begins to resemble a permanent campaign staged inside a shared language that no longer produces shared meanings. Politics becomes less a collective labour of judgement than a competitive production of loyalty, where words are chosen not to clarify the world but to certify one's membership within a moral tribe. The result is a public sphere that still speaks constantly yet communicates less, because language is deployed as a badge, not as a bridge. Tribal rhetoric has a recognisable structure. It simplifies complexity into moral binaries, converting disagreement into moral contamination. It narrows the range of legitimate voices by policing tone, vocabulary, and symbolic gestures. It replaces deliberation with alignment, so that the highest civic virtue becomes consistency with one's side rather than responsiveness to reality. In such a climate, moderation and radicalism cease to be positions within a common conversation and instead become identities, each with its own vocabulary of dignity and insult. The most important effect is not that people become convinced by new ideas, but that they become trained in new reflexes: how to interpret a slogan, how to read an opponent's statement as an attack, how to treat compromise as capitulation. A society can therefore experience intense political participation while losing the deeper civic skill that participation presupposes: the ability to remain in the same argumentative room with those who disagree. The internal fracture of a party is particularly revealing because it shows tribalism operating without the simple explanation of ideological difference between two camps. Conflict inside a coalition discloses that rhetorical tribalism is not merely a response to competing programmes; it is also a competition for the right to define the coalition's moral centre. One faction claims that victory requires reassurance, another that victory requires transformation, and each narrates the other as the reason defeat is always near. The rhetoric of strategy becomes a rhetoric of identity: one side casts itself as the only serious guardian of electability, the other as the only authentic guardian of justice. These roles are not just political; they become existential. To question the tactic is to question the person. To debate the slogan is to demean the lived experience. In this way, a party's internal argument becomes an allegory of the national argument: each camp experiences itself as the last sane enclave, and experiences the other not as a partner in error but as an internal threat.

Tribal rhetoric thrives on conflicting narratives because it does not require shared facts, only shared feelings. A coalition can win a major contest and still experience the outcome as a psychological defeat, because its internal factions evaluate the same event through different symbolic economies. One side reads victory as evidence that caution works, the other reads victory as evidence that mobilisation works, and both read the down-ballot disappointment as proof that the other side is sabotaging the future. The bitter irony is that electoral politics, which should teach proportionality and context, can instead intensify moral absolutism. When the margin of victory is narrow, each tribe feels licensed to declare that it alone saved the enterprise,

and that the other nearly destroyed it. The lesson becomes not humility but resentment. The civic imagination shrinks, because the coalition no longer asks, ‘What do people need?’ but ‘Which faction deserves credit?’ In that shift, the citizen is replaced by the spectator who watches their own side perform righteousness against internal and external enemies. The problem becomes more severe when political talk is mediated by systems that reward intensity over nuance. In a high-volume media environment, the rhetorical advantage belongs to positions that can be condensed into emotionally charged phrases that travel quickly, divide cleanly, and recruit efficiently. The political economy of attention is therefore also a moral economy: it incentivises speech that triggers outrage, suspicion, and identity affirmation. A slogan that offers moral purity and a clear enemy will often outcompete a policy that offers complexity and trade-offs, even if the policy better serves the common good. As tribal rhetoric becomes the default form, the public sphere gradually loses its tolerance for the slow virtues: explanation, revision, partial agreement, patient correction. Democracy does not collapse because people stop caring, but because caring becomes performative and brittle, unable to survive the ordinary ambiguities that governance entails. A striking feature of this situation is that the most dangerous rhetorical forms do not merely argue; they create alternative realities in which violence can appear as civic duty. When people are convinced that the basic procedures of democracy are fraudulent, then lawful outcomes can be reinterpreted as crimes and illegal resistance can be reinterpreted as patriotism. The mechanics of persuasion here are not complicated. A community learns to treat certain claims as sacred, and to treat rebuttal as persecution. The rhetorical action is less a chain of evidence than a chain of identity cues: who says it, who repeats it, which media space amplifies it, which symbols accompany it, which enemies deny it. Once this structure is in place, accountability becomes difficult because responsibility is distributed across a network: leaders hint, supporters infer, media repeats, peers validate, and the resulting action is experienced as collective self-defence rather than individual choice. The tragedy is that the very capacity for moral seriousness is exploited, redirected toward fantasies of betrayal and redemption, until civic energy is spent on defending the tribe’s story rather than governing the shared world.

A philosophical diagnosis must therefore treat tribalism as a problem of civic epistemology and civic ethics at the same time. Epistemologically, tribal rhetoric teaches people what counts as knowledge by teaching them whom to trust. Ethics follows, because moral judgement becomes inseparable from loyalty. In such conditions, the virtues required for democratic life appear naive. Civility looks like weakness, compromise like corruption, and deliberation like delay. Yet these are not superficial manners; they are the conditions for a plural society to remain one society. Civility, properly understood, is not politeness but the discipline of recognising that disagreement does not revoke the other’s membership in the shared order. When civility declines, democracy becomes a machine that still counts votes but cannot interpret them together, because interpretation itself is split into rival moral communities. This makes rhetorical education more than a classroom ideal. It becomes a survival practice. If political tribalism is treated as a recurring rhetorical form, then it can be analysed, anticipated, and interrupted. People can be trained to recognise the pattern: when speech is designed to harden identity rather than test claims; when the opponent is described as an existential threat rather than a contestable rival; when policy becomes a pretext for moral theatre; when slogans become substitutes for reasons. Such recognition is not a guarantee of harmony, but it is a defence against manipulation, especially in media systems that reward the loudest and most extreme performances. The practical aim is not to eliminate strong commitments, but to strengthen the capacity to inhabit them without turning them into weapons against the possibility of shared

governance. The deeper hope is that tribal identity does not have to be a pathology. Humans have always formed groups, and groups have often maintained internal norms of reconciliation, restraint, and mutual responsibility. The question is whether modern political tribes can rediscover the civic function of conflict without collapsing into the pleasure of hostility. This would require a shift in rhetorical imagination: a renewed ability to speak in ways that preserve a common world even while contesting its meaning. That does not mean pretending that differences are minor, or denying the reality of structural injustice, or silencing the moral urgency of reform. It means learning to translate urgency into institutions and arguments rather than into permanent internal schism. It also means resisting the temptation to treat every disagreement as a referendum on dignity. Dignity matters, but when dignity is made synonymous with assent, the only remaining political relation is domination.

The most realistic route back to democratic cohesion is therefore not a utopian consensus but a workable rhetoric of coalition: a shared vocabulary of common goods that can contain disagreement without turning it into civil enmity. Such a vocabulary does not arise spontaneously in a fractured media environment; it must be cultivated through habits, incentives, and leadership. Leadership matters because it sets the tone of what is rewarded: whether representatives model deliberation or model contempt, whether they treat opponents as citizens or as targets, whether they interpret victory as mandate to govern or mandate to punish. In a mature democracy, victory should enlarge responsibility, not shrink empathy. The test is whether a political community can remain plural without dissolving into mutually reactive tribes that live only to contradict one another. Rhetorical tribalism is ultimately a theory of how democracies fall apart while still speaking the language of democracy. The institutions remain, the elections occur, the news cycles churn, the parties compete, yet the shared ground necessary for meaning-making erodes. What appears as energetic participation can therefore conceal a deeper disintegration: the loss of a common rhetorical space in which persuasion is possible, accountability is intelligible, and disagreement is survivable. The remedy is neither silence nor uniformity. It is the reconstruction of civic speech as a practice of living together under conditions of difference, where argument is not a ritual of humiliation but a method of collective orientation. In that sense, the future of democracy depends not only on what people believe, but on how people learn to speak when belief is contested.

Kelley, C.E. (2022) Democratic Disunity: Rhetorical Tribalism in 2020. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Encoded Selves: The Mediatized Reconstruction of Identity

In Philip David Marshall's writings on persona and digital sentiment the transformation of the public self is traced from an age of representation to an age of presentation, revealing how identity moved from being symbolised by a few to being performed by all. Over the last two centuries communication technologies have not merely transmitted social relations but reorganised them. Every dominant medium produces a characteristic way of appearing in the world, and through that appearance produces a characteristic way of being human. The public self is therefore not a constant psychological core gradually expressed through better tools; it is a historical construction repeatedly reshaped by the forms through which humans encounter each other. In the earlier mass media order public identity was representative. Newspapers, cinema, radio and television selected particular figures and magnified them until they stood as condensed versions of collective values. The film star, the political leader, the national hero,

and the charismatic performer functioned as symbolic surfaces onto which the audience projected desires and anxieties. Most individuals did not present themselves publicly; they recognised themselves through others who appeared on their behalf. Visibility was scarce and therefore powerful. To appear meant to embody more than oneself. Fame was less about personality than about representation. The public figure was a mirror held up to a population that largely remained unseen. This regime created distance. The spectator observed, interpreted and imitated but rarely interacted. The boundary between private and public was firm because communication channels were one-directional. The few addressed the many, and the many negotiated their identity internally through identification with those visible figures. Cultural life therefore depended on a dialectic between presence and absence: a limited number of bodies were everywhere visible while the majority remained invisible yet imaginatively engaged. The contemporary media environment dissolves this structure. Instead of representation there is presentation. Each individual now performs a version of themselves within shared digital spaces. Visibility is no longer exceptional but expected. The public self ceases to be an achievement and becomes a condition of participation. To exist socially requires appearing continuously. One does not wait to be represented; one must represent oneself.

The crucial concept linking these eras is persona. Persona is neither the authentic self nor a simple mask. It is a strategic construction shaped by the expectations of an audience and the affordances of a medium. In the representative regime persona belonged primarily to celebrities; in the presentational regime persona becomes universal. The self is externalised into a curated form designed for recognition. Each individual maintains multiple such forms across different contexts, adjusting tone and gesture to fit specific communities. Digital culture intensifies this process by embedding persona within technical infrastructures. The self appears not only to others but to systems that record, sort and interpret behaviour. Every gesture leaves a trace, and traces accumulate into patterns. Identity therefore becomes reconstructable independently of intention. The individual composes a narrative while the system composes a parallel narrative from data. Both circulate simultaneously, influencing perception and opportunity. Within this environment emotion acquires a new status. Feelings once communicated through extended expression now appear through compressed symbols—icons, tags and repeatable images. These signs do not merely express mood; they standardise it. A limited repertoire of emotional indicators allows rapid recognition across large networks. Shared understanding becomes efficient but simplified. Emotion becomes legible at scale. These emotional emblems perform a dual function. Socially they create communities of sentiment, enabling strangers to coordinate responses through minimal signals. Technically they act as metadata, allowing systems to classify affective states. What appears as spontaneous communication simultaneously serves as structured information. The individual believes they are sharing experience; the system interprets behavioural tendencies. The consequence is an affective economy. Attention is drawn toward signals that generate engagement, and engagement feeds back into visibility. Feelings circulate as measurable intensities. Certain expressions travel further and therefore become preferable. Gradually individuals learn which emotions are communicable and which remain silent. The repertoire of public feeling narrows to what is transmissible. Inner experience adapts to external feedback.

Periods of crisis reveal this mechanism clearly. When physical proximity decreases, digital communication expands to compensate. Behavioural norms develop rapidly as communities negotiate acceptable forms of expression within mediated environments. Courtesy, empathy and outrage all become stylised through repeatable patterns. Emotional life becomes

coordinated across distance yet filtered through standardised gestures. The presentational regime therefore alters empathy itself. Instead of arising primarily from shared presence it arises from recognisable signals. To feel with others is to respond appropriately to encoded cues. This does not eliminate sincerity but reframes it. Authenticity becomes coherence between displayed emotion and expected context rather than correspondence with inner depth. A believable performance counts as genuine because communication depends on recognisability. At the same time economic structures integrate with these communicative patterns. Aggregated sentiment predicts behaviour. Patterns of approval and disapproval guide the distribution of information and opportunities. The public self becomes both social and economic capital. Individuals cultivate visibility while infrastructures correlate visibility with consumption. The distinction between conversation and transaction blurs. Collective life reorganises around these processes. Groups form through shared interpretive habits rather than shared locality. Agreement is performed through synchronised signals. Disagreement appears as divergence of style as much as divergence of belief. Political and cultural alignments emerge through rhythms of expression. Communities are less defined by what they think than by how they communicate.

The transformation also alters privacy. Observation no longer requires direct participation. Passive attention leaves measurable traces. Even silence communicates preference through duration and repetition. The boundary between observer and participant weakens because presence itself generates data. One cannot simply watch without contributing to the reconstruction of the environment. This environment produces a new form of reflexivity. Individuals become aware that they are continuously interpreted. They anticipate reaction and shape expression accordingly. Self-awareness becomes anticipatory rather than retrospective. One learns to feel in ways that are shareable. Experience is filtered before articulation. The inner life adapts to its anticipated reception. Such conditions reshape cultural memory. The past persists as archived presentation rather than recollected experience. Identity includes its previous versions, all equally accessible. Continuity becomes negotiated rather than assumed. The self appears as a sequence of updates rather than a narrative arc. Memory becomes interface. Yet this transformation does not abolish connection; it reorganises it. Human beings remain social creatures seeking recognition and belonging. The presentational regime provides abundant interaction but fragments depth. Communication increases while shared context decreases. Understanding requires translation between overlapping but distinct interpretive communities.

The central tension of this era lies between agency and structure. Individuals actively curate their personas, yet infrastructures guide possible forms. Expression appears voluntary but is shaped by systems optimised for circulation. The self feels autonomous while operating within patterns discovered by aggregation. Freedom exists within parameters defined by communicability. To grasp this condition one must abandon the notion that media simply convey identity. Media configure identity. Each technological form establishes particular relations between visibility, emotion and value. The representative era produced symbolic figures through scarcity; the presentational era produces distributed personas through abundance. Both organise social imagination differently. The mediatized self therefore stands as the contemporary form of human appearance. Every individual participates in constructing and maintaining a public version of themselves. This version mediates interaction with others and with systems. It is at once expressive and strategic, personal and infrastructural. It embodies the convergence of communication and organisation. The future of culture will depend on how societies negotiate this convergence. If presentation becomes the sole measure of existence,

identity risks dissolving into endless adaptation. If awareness develops regarding the mechanics of mediation, new forms of collective understanding may emerge that balance performance with reflection. The task is not to return to a pre-mediated authenticity but to understand the structures shaping appearance and thereby recover responsibility within them. The public self has moved from representation to presentation, from rare spectacle to universal condition. Through persona, individuals navigate a world where emotion is encoded, recognition quantified and connection mediated. Human culture now unfolds within this layered visibility, where to exist together is to continuously reconstruct who we are through the forms that allow us to appear.

Marshall, P. D. (2022). Digital sentiment: Persona and the personal curation and industrial correlation of affect and emotion in our transformed digital human culture. Paper presented at World Conference on Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences and Education 2022, Valencia, Spain. https://prezi.com/i/view/Ta4gbK3xbsA5SRKnleOj/

The Edited Self: Living Under the Gaze of Your Own Persona

P. David Marshall, 'Monitoring Persona: Mediatized Identity and the Edited Public Self' (2015), describes a decisive shift in modern culture: the public self is no longer an occasional performance reserved for special roles, but an everyday obligation that has become naturalised, habitual, and quietly compulsory. People have always carried a persona into public life, because social existence requires some degree of selection, tact, and staging. What changes in the contemporary environment is not the existence of persona but the expectation that persona must be mediatized, kept in circulation, monitored for coherence, and continually edited as if it were a living publication. This is not simply communication. It is a new discipline of the self, structured by platforms and sustained by the repeated ritual of revision. The contemporary public sphere is increasingly organised by what can be understood as an intercommunication industry: an ecosystem of applications and services that invites people to conduct ordinary life through digital gates. Searching, posting, booking, sharing, networking, selling, dating, commenting, reacting, rating, and tracking are routed through interfaces that do not merely transmit a pre-existing identity but require identity to be formatted in order to function. A person becomes legible through profiles, handles, bios, histories, feeds, reputations, and account settings. The system does not ask only, 'Who are you?' It asks, 'How will you appear?' and then converts that appearance into a durable informational object that can be stored, compared, circulated, and monetised. The public self becomes not merely expressive but infrastructural. To participate is to be reproduced as data. This reproduction has two intertwined authors. On one side stands the individual, who selects, frames, filters, captions, deletes, apologises, clarifies, and updates, learning to treat the self as an artefact with an audience. On the other side stand the institutions of intercommunication, which harvest, organise, and correlate what has been expressed. The result is an elaborate system of monitoring. People monitor themselves, and the system monitors people, and both forms of monitoring feed each other. The self becomes an ongoing project of maintenance, a persistent work of managing visibility.

The simplest entry into this logic is the culture of self-improvement as translated into digital tracking. Fitness applications are revealing not because they are extreme, but because they are banal. They show how a desire to improve the self is converted into a measurable narrative. A wristband counts steps; a phone tracks movement; a programme estimates calories; maps reconstruct the route; charts render progress. Even minor errors become instructive. Rocking a child may be read as exercise. Vacuuming becomes a question of caloric equivalence. The

phone becomes an object that must be carried everywhere, not for communication but to ensure that the record of movement is complete. What appears as a private attempt at well-being becomes an insistence on documentation. This is the quantified self in everyday form. Yet what matters is not measurement alone, but narrativisation. Raw data is translated into graphs, badges, streaks, weekly summaries, and visualisations that resemble the design language of media publications. The self is rendered into readable form. A diary once required sustained reflection and written continuity; now an application produces the outline of a self-story automatically, ready to be reviewed, revised, and reposted. The resulting self is not only remembered, but formatted. A crucial transformation occurs when monitoring is joined to sharing. Sharing in digital culture is rarely the intimate exchange the word suggests. It is closer to publication. To share progress is to announce a version of oneself into a public space. The activity becomes visible not as mere information but as a claim: a statement of discipline, aspiration, improvement, or belonging. Visibility becomes a moral currency. A person displays evidence of effort, and others may reward it with recognition. The public gaze becomes a motivational device, a mechanism of accountability, and a source of social value. It creates an outward-facing persona: the fit self, the improving self, the consistent self, the self that is becoming.

This outward persona is not best understood as fake. It is strategic. It is a coping device for navigating a world in which social meaning increasingly depends on visible traces. The mask here is not a lie; it is a technique. It allows one to exit interiority and become legible, and legibility is increasingly the price of participation. The persona is a public interface that makes a private life socially portable. But a second axis of value emerges at the same moment. The same published traces that build personal visibility also become industrial assets. The intercommunication industry treats the shared self as monetisable information: patterns to be used for targeting, prediction, and market segmentation. The individual's narrative becomes part of a larger economy of correlation. The persona is therefore doubled: it is a socially meaningful mask and an economically extractable profile. Even when the individual seeks self-knowledge, the system seeks behavioural legibility. The self becomes a source of value not only to others but to infrastructures that sell access to attention. Seen historically, this development continues a longer trajectory of the internet that can be described through two meta-movements: increasing personalisation and increasing mediatization. Early web culture already suggested that individuals could publish themselves. The personal homepage of the 1990s offered a first taste of mediatized self-presentation: a small magazine of interests, images, links, and statements. Few people were actually seen at scale, yet the act of publishing carried an aura borrowed from mass media. It felt powerful because it resembled the visual finish of professional industries. For a moment, producing a web page placed the individual near forms once reserved for corporations and broadcasters. The fantasy of equalised media production appeared.

That aura was always unstable. As more people gained the ability to publish, publication became ordinary. What had seemed like a privileged act became an expected act. Mediatization expanded from the extraordinary to the routine. The self did not merely express itself through media; it came to understand itself through media norms. Public value became aligned with the styles of public individuality that older industries had long cultivated, especially celebrity. The difference is that what was once concentrated in a small set of visible figures is now distributed: the celebrity pedagogy of self-presentation becomes general social practice. This is the contemporary emergence of the mediatized self: an identity formed through the assumption of

being watched, interpreted, and judged. Digital culture provides not a singular audience but a permanent possibility of audiences: friends, strangers, employers, institutions, followers, lurkers, and algorithms. The self is shaped by this possibility even when no one is visibly present. The gaze becomes internal. One anticipates reaction and pre-edits the self. Monitoring becomes a habit, and the habit becomes identity. This produces a presentational regime, in which social life is organised around continuous self-display rather than occasional representation. The older media regime trained publics to recognise themselves through stars and leaders. The presentational regime trains individuals to become their own spokespersons, their own publicists, their own editors. Each account becomes a small broadcast channel. Each person becomes an ongoing press office for their own existence.

The concept of micro-celebrity illuminates this shift without requiring that everyone be famous. Micro-celebrity is not stardom; it is a style of self-relation. It is the disciplined orientation toward visibility: speaking as if to an audience, curating as if public value depended on coherence, and treating attention as a measurable resource. The self becomes para-social even in ordinary life. Instead of direct interpersonal intimacy, there is mediated connection: the relationship is carried through feeds, profiles, and posts, where distance is maintained even among those who know each other. The persona is both intimate and staged, personal and performative, because mediation is now the default form of social presence. The workplace intensifies this logic. Persona is no longer only recreational; it becomes professional infrastructure. The self is maintained as reputation, and reputation is treated as employable capital. This introduces a hierarchy of persona labour. Those with status often do not need to broadcast themselves; others broadcast them. For those without status, self-promotion becomes a duty, and the edited self can predate achievement. One must appear as if one has a trajectory in order to be granted one. The persona becomes a speculative asset: a promise of future value. In this environment, individuals learn a new literacy: the ability to craft, read, and evaluate personas. People become sensitive to tone, rhythm, credibility cues, and the strategic use of revelation. They also become anxious, because the persona is never finished. The edited self requires maintenance. It can be damaged by inconsistency, by the resurfacing of past versions, by the wrong association, by silence, by misinterpretation. The self is therefore lived as an ongoing management problem.

A deeper philosophical shift follows. The representational era promised that media would reveal the true self, whether through confession, authenticity, or psychological depth. The presentational era relaxes that demand. It becomes increasingly comfortable with the mask as the operational self. The inner life does not disappear, but it loses monopoly status. The public interface becomes the practical identity, the one that circulates, earns trust, builds ties, and suffers consequences. The self becomes a battleground not because people are uniquely superficial, but because the conditions of social life have changed. Visibility is no longer a special event. It is the medium in which social reality is negotiated. The boundary between public and private is therefore not simply eroded; it is reorganised. The intercommunication industry is designed to elicit disclosure, because disclosure produces data, and data produces value. Yet disclosure also produces belonging, recognition, and emotional exchange. People are not simply coerced into revealing; they are invited by rewards that feel human: connection, applause, solidarity, reassurance, even love. This is why monitoring persona becomes second nature. It is both an economic extraction and a social adaptation. One edits the self to be seen, and being seen becomes a condition for being included. The resulting culture is a specular economy: a world in which the self is constantly reflected back through metrics, comments,

shares, and the implied judgement of audiences. People preen their posts, measure their reception, refine their image, and wonder what their followers mean. The persona becomes both a shield and a product. It protects by allowing strategic presentation, and it exposes by making the self legible to systems that commodify it. In such a world, the central question is no longer how to express oneself, but how to live when the self is continuously edited, continuously watched, and continuously converted into value.

Marshall, P. (2015). Monitoring Persona: Mediatized Identity and the Edited Public Self. [online] Available at: https://www.frameliteraryjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Frame-28_1-Monitoring-Persona.pdf.

10. Tertius Observator

Mirrors of Belonging: When Media Writes the Self

Youssef Acim's article 'The Impact of Media on Identity Construction' (Dibon Journal of Languages, 2025) frames media not as a neutral background for modern life but as an active environment in which identity is continuously assembled, tested, and revised. The basic claim is deceptively simple: people do not merely consume stories, images, and slogans, but live inside them, and over time they begin to borrow their grammar for describing who they are. In a connected world, identity is increasingly formed in the space where perception precedes reality, where what seems true arrives before what is true, and where recognition often depends less on lived substance than on the visibility of signs. Media becomes a workshop of the self: it offers templates of aspiration, scripts of belonging, and ready-made explanations for conflict, dignity, shame, and desire. The self then develops as a negotiation between inherited experience and mediated imagination, between what one feels in private and what one learns to say in public. The result is that identity becomes less a discovery of an inner essence and more a practical arrangement with a circulating world of representations. This is not simply a psychological transformation, but an ethical and political one, because whoever governs representation influences the conditions under which people become intelligible to themselves and to others. The question therefore is never only what media shows, but who is allowed to appear as normal, admirable, threatening, inferior, or invisible, and how these distributions of attention harden into cultural common sense. Media, in this sense, does not just describe society; it selects, prioritises, and organises the cues by which society recognises itself. It is a system of emphasis, a machine for making some things seem urgent and others negligible, some lives central and others peripheral, some identities unquestionable and others suspicious. This is why identity construction cannot be separated from power. Even when media appears to entertain, it quietly teaches audiences what to desire, what to fear, what to consider respectable, and what to consider ridiculous. The most significant influence lies not in direct behavioural control but in the shaping of the horizon of thought, because once the horizon is established, many choices feel like free choice while remaining pre-structured by the available frames. In this environment, media functions as a moral organiser: it offers simplified vocabularies for complex realities and then rewards those who speak in its recognisable terms. It becomes easier to repeat the phrases that already circulate than to invent language adequate to one's own experience. Over time, this produces a subtle discipline, a self-monitoring impulse that prevents people from stating what will be punished by prevailing norms of visibility. Identity then becomes a balance between expression and self-censorship, between the desire to be truthful and the desire to remain socially legible. This tension grows sharper as contemporary media

shifts from one-to-many broadcasting toward many-to-many replication. The individual is no longer simply a receiver but also a transmitter, a curator, a distributor, and increasingly a producer. Yet this does not automatically produce freedom. The many-to-many environment can magnify plurality, but it can also accelerate imitation, reinforce the most viral simplifications, and reward the most emotionally efficient stereotypes. The speed of circulation becomes a filter: what travels fastest becomes what feels most real. In such conditions, identity is shaped not only by what one believes, but by what one is repeatedly exposed to, because repetition constructs familiarity, and familiarity often masquerades as truth. Here the logic of agenda-setting becomes existential: by continuously highlighting certain topics and perspectives, media does not merely inform audiences but trains them in what to treat as important, and importance is one of the deepest foundations of identity. People become, to a significant degree, what they are taught to notice. If the world is presented through a narrow set of recurring frames, audiences begin to interpret their own lives through those frames, even when their lived experience exceeds them. Identity becomes compressed to fit into the available categories, and what does not fit is either silenced or experienced as personal confusion. This is where othering enters as a routine mechanism. When media repeatedly portrays certain groups as problems to be managed, symbols of danger, or objects of moral instruction, the public imagination begins to treat these depictions as the group itself. The person is replaced by the sign.

A human life becomes a shorthand. Then the audience's emotional response attaches not to individuals but to categories, and categories are easier to fear, mock, or idealise than real people. Yet the same machinery can work in the opposite direction when counter-representations circulate. The key is not that digital platforms inherently liberate, but that they multiply the possibilities for alternative framings to compete with dominant narratives. Identity construction becomes a struggle between imposed simplifications and self-authored complexity. A mediated environment can therefore generate alienation and agency at the same time: alienation when the self recognises that it is being described from the outside by hostile or shallow frames, and agency when the self discovers spaces in which it can speak back, remix, parody, or reconstruct its image through different communities of attention. This is why the most important battlefield may not be between media and reality, but between competing realities offered by different representational regimes. The self is pulled between them, and identity becomes a lived act of selection, not only among beliefs but among interpretative communities. A person may inherit one set of meanings at home, receive another at school, absorb another through national media, and then discover another through transnational digital cultures. Identity becomes hybrid not as a fashionable label but as an existential condition: the self is composed at the crossroads of incompatible stories. The pressure then is to reconcile contradictions that were not chosen, to create coherence inside a world that continually offers incoherent cues. In this context, media influence is often gradual and cumulative rather than immediate and dramatic. A single programme may not change a person, but ten hours a day of recurring images, moral cues, and aspirational templates can become a second education, one that operates beneath explicit instruction. Media does not have to command; it only has to normalise. When normalisation succeeds, people begin to adjust behaviour, speech, and even desire to align with what appears socially rewarded. This is why the relationship between media and identity is not a simple model of domination. It is a dynamic exchange in which audiences also interpret, resist, reinterpret, and sometimes weaponise media narratives for their own purposes. Yet this flexibility does not erase structural inequality. Some groups possess more resources to produce and distribute their self-images, while others are largely spoken about rather than allowed to

speak. The ability to narrate is itself a form of power, because narration determines which experiences count as credible. Identity formation is therefore shaped by access to narrative authority: who can frame the terms, who can set the agenda, who can define what is normal, and who must constantly explain themselves. When certain frames dominate, alternative voices are not merely disagreed with; they are marginalised as unthinkable, excessive, or illegitimate. The result is a public sphere that appears plural while remaining structurally selective. This selectivity is intensified by the historical shift toward visual dominance. Modern media increasingly speaks through images that feel immediate and incontestable. Images create the sensation of direct access to reality, yet they are among the most powerful framing devices because they can conceal their own construction. A caption, a headline, a crop, a montage, a repeated visual trope, and a familiar narrative arc can guide interpretation before reflection begins. Identity then becomes not only something one says but something one learns to look like. Aspirations attach to bodies, styles, consumer goods, and performative gestures. People internalise ideals as images, and then judge themselves against those images, often experiencing inadequacy as personal failure rather than as the predictable effect of an engineered comparison. In a media-saturated culture, the self becomes a site of continuous evaluation, because representation offers endless standards for measuring worth. This produces both conformity and anxiety: conformity, because it is safer to align with dominant templates, and anxiety, because alignment is never fully achieved.

Yet there is also the possibility of critical distance, and this is where media literacy becomes more than a civic slogan. Media literacy is a philosophical practice: it means learning to see frames as frames, to recognise that every narrative selects, that every image excludes, and that what appears natural is often manufactured through repetition. It means refusing the false choice between naïve trust and total cynicism. Instead, it develops a disciplined suspicion that asks how meanings are produced, who benefits from them, and what alternatives have been suppressed. Such literacy does not eliminate the need for stories, because humans cannot live without narratives, but it changes the relationship to them. It allows the self to inhabit mediated reality without being fully absorbed by it. It restores a measure of agency by making the invisible mechanisms of attention visible. In a world where identity is continuously shaped by agendas, frames, and circulating stereotypes, the most realistic form of freedom may be the capacity to decode representation before it becomes destiny, to recognise othering before it hardens into habit, and to reclaim complexity before it is replaced by a convenient label.

Acim, Y. (2025). The Impact of Media on Identity Construction. Dibon Journal of Languages, 1(2),165-173

A Masked Public: The New Self as Media Work

P. David Marshall, Christopher Moore, and Kim Barbour's Persona Studies: An Introduction (2020) begins from a suspicion that the word 'new' is both seductive and unreliable, because modern culture markets novelty as a daily stimulant. The sensation of living through unprecedented change is continuously manufactured by headlines, rankings, miracle claims, and the theatre of astonishment that makes ordinary time feel like permanent rupture. Yet the argument does not depend on a cheap cult of the new. It proposes something more precise: that a long history of public selfhood has reached an intensified, naturalised, and technologically organised form. People have always entered public space by becoming visible to others, adjusting behaviour, dress, tone, and etiquette to a shared world. What changes in the

contemporary environment is that this public adjustment migrates into media systems that record, distribute, evaluate, and monetise the act of appearing. The public self is no longer only something performed in streets and rooms; it is produced in interfaces, measured in feedback, archived as data, and reorganised into searchable identity. This shift matters because it transforms the question of who a person is into the question of how a person is presented, circulated, and made legible across multiple publics at once. The chapter's central instrument is the concept of persona. It is introduced not as a fashionable synonym for personality, but as a way to name the crafted surface by which an individual becomes intelligible in public. Persona is neither the individual nor the collective. This is crucial because it prevents two common mistakes. The first mistake is to treat public identity as the same thing as the private person. The second is to treat public identity as merely the expression of a group. Persona instead names the mediating layer, the public mask that an individual constructs in relation to imagined audiences, communities, and institutional expectations. It is the projection by which one enters collective life. The mask is not simply deception. It is a strategy for coping, navigating, persuading, belonging, and surviving. In that sense, persona is an art of negotiation: it shapes how a person becomes socially recognisable, and how social recognition feeds back into self-understanding. The mask does not merely conceal; it enables. Without some form of mask, public life would be impossible, because public life requires a shape that others can read. This is why the concept refuses to collapse into celebrity. Celebrity is an intensified form of persona, a historically privileged laboratory of public individuality, but not the definition of persona itself. The point is broader and more unsettling: the practices once concentrated in the star system have been generalised. What used to be a specialised craft handled by industries, managers, editors, and publicity machines is now distributed as everyday labour. The contemporary person is invited, and increasingly required, to do the work of presentation: selecting images, refining captions, managing tone, calibrating disclosure, staging authenticity, performing intimacy, and building recognisable reputation. In earlier media environments, audiences learned about public figures through newspapers, magazines, radio, film, and television. Those forms built a public sphere populated by prominent individuals who appeared representationally complete, as if personally known. The contemporary environment expands the logic of that sphere into a presentational regime, where billions produce their own mediated visibility. The public self becomes a daily artefact assembled in text, image, audio, and video, and distributed through platforms whose architecture makes presentation feel like ordinary sociality.

This transformation is described as mediatization: not simply that media influences society, but that the self is increasingly constructed through forms of expression that resemble media production. Communication becomes multi-modal by default, and identity is rebuilt through these sign systems as a routine condition of social existence. The self is not only expressed but reconstructed. Even the simplest interaction participates in this reconstruction, because it occurs in an environment where gestures are recordable, shareable, and interpretable by audiences both intended and unintended. A message is no longer merely a message; it is a trace. A trace becomes part of a profile. A profile becomes a public object. The accumulation of such objects forms a secondary body, a mediated body, which moves through networks and returns to the individual as reputation, opportunity, and judgement. Persona is proposed as the most accurate name for this process because it implies an interplay between public and private. It carries the old theatrical sense of a mask and the older political sense that public life has always required role and performance. Historically, public and private were not merely different zones but different moral worlds. The domestic sphere and the public sphere demanded different speech,

different conduct, different forms of dignity and concealment. A discontinuity between public role and private life was not only permitted but expected. The contemporary transformation does not abolish that discontinuity; it reorganises it. It multiplies the stages on which a person must appear, while blurring the boundaries between them. A person is a parent in one context, a professional in another, a friend in another, a citizen in another. Platforms invite these roles to collapse into one stream while audiences remain fragmented, producing constant risk: the wrong audience at the wrong time, the wrong frame around the wrong disclosure. Persona becomes the tool for managing that risk, yet the tool is never fully stable because publicness is no longer a single space but an overlapping set of micro-publics, quasi-publics, and algorithmically expanded publics. The chapter suggests that persona studies matters because persona is observable. Public masks are now archived and comparable. The evolution of disclosure, the rhythm of self-editing, the gradual shift from private diary to public narrative, the development of micro-publics and alliances, the rise and fall of reputations, the circulation of moments into memes, the conversion of intimacy into content, all of this becomes visible as material for analysis. This visibility is attractive because it promises knowledge of the self in motion. Yet it is also dangerous because what is visible is always shaped by the medium that makes it visible. The same environment that allows people to present themselves also structures the terms of presentation, guiding what counts as engaging, shareable, credible, admirable, and normal. This is why persona is never purely personal. It is relational and infrastructural. It depends on how others are presenting themselves, what is rewarded, what is punished, what is copied, and what is rendered invisible.

A further complication is that persona is produced on corporately owned platforms. The platforms are not neutral stages. They are economic systems that profit from personalised information. They offer people the sensation of sharing while simultaneously extracting data that can be mined, analysed, and sold. This produces a double persona. One persona is the one a person believes they are making for friends, followers, and communities. Another persona is assembled by the platform through data aggregation, classification, prediction, and targeting. The public self becomes a quasi-object, something that circulates as an entity distinct from the person, used for social recognition and economic inference at once. The person is thus invited into an uneasy arrangement: gaining visibility and connection while conceding that visibility is organised into commodities. Persona becomes both self-expression and product specification, both social mask and data profile. This economic structure changes the ethics of selfhood. In a presentational regime, identity becomes labour. Not only the labour of posting, but the labour of anticipating reception, of maintaining coherence across contexts, of monitoring one's value, of avoiding reputational collapse, of adapting to shifts in platform norms, and of performing the correct degree of authenticity. A person learns to treat the self as something that must be managed, strategically displayed, and continuously updated. The older aspiration of discovering an inner, true self is not necessarily abolished, but it is displaced by a more practical question: what version of the self will work here, now, for this audience, in this system? The mask becomes comfortable not because people become shallow, but because the conditions of social existence make mask-work continuous. The self is increasingly lived as an interface that must remain functional. The chapter's ambition is not to moralise nostalgia for a pre-digital innocence. It recognises that persona has always existed, that public life has always required role, and that mediated public figures have shaped cultural imagination for centuries. The claim is that the scale and naturalisation of persona production has become unprecedented: the mask is no longer exceptional; it is ambient. In this ambient condition, persona studies offers a vocabulary for understanding what is happening when people become their own publicists,

when communities become audiences, when intimacy becomes legible content, and when the public self becomes a negotiable object in systems of value. The promise of this vocabulary is clarity: the ability to name the hidden work of selfhood under presentational media conditions, and to see that what feels personal is often structural. The danger, however, is that clarity arrives after the transformation has already become ordinary. The mask does not announce itself as a mask. It presents itself as life. The task, then, is not simply to condemn persona, but to understand its necessity, its costs, and its role in a world where the self is produced, circulated, and judged as a public artefact.

Marshall, P.D., Moore, C. and Barbour, K. (2020) Persona Studies: An Introduction. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

Two Eyes, One Mask: Persona in the Age of Intercommunication

In P. David Marshall, Christopher Moore, and Kim Barbour, Persona Studies the distinctive feature of the contemporary moment is that public identity is no longer a special case reserved for performers, leaders, or the famous. It is becoming a routine demand placed on ordinary participation. People are not merely present in the world; people are expected to be legible within it, to appear in formats that can be recognised, circulated, assessed, and retrieved. What used to be a social fact that arrived through proximity has become a cultural obligation that arrives through infrastructure. The self is increasingly encountered as a mediated surface, and persona is the name for the organised surface that stands in for a person in a field of attention. The background condition for this shift is a new hybridity in how communication happens. There was a time when it seemed possible to separate ‘media’ from ‘communication’. Media named the large representational machines of print, cinema, radio, and television, while communication named interpersonal exchange: speech, letters, phone calls, and local relations. That conceptual division now struggles to describe everyday life. Personal conversation is routinely conducted through media-like forms, while media circulates in the cadence and intimacy once reserved for interpersonal contact. The crucial point is not simply that technologies have converged, but that practices have fused: the ways people speak, feel, perform, and recognise one another have been redesigned by networked systems that record, filter, and route expression. This hybrid condition can be understood as intercommunication: the steady remaking of interpersonal life through platforms that both enable exchange and make it readable, searchable, and economically actionable. Intercommunication is not a slogan for novelty; it is a description of an interface. Human expression is increasingly folded into machine sorting. A message is not only a message; it is also a data point. A reaction is not only a reaction; it is also an input. A photograph is not only a memory; it is also an index. The ordinary gestures of social life are doubled: they carry meaning for humans and produce signals for systems. This double function changes what it means to have a public self, because the self now exists in at least two audiences at once: the visible audience of friends, followers, colleagues, strangers, and the invisible audience of computational processes that translate speech and image into patterns and predictions. Persona emerges as the negotiable form a person builds in order to be present within that dual address.

In the older representational regime, public figures stood for the many. The star, the politician, the announcer, and the anchor condensed a collective story into a recognisable individuality. They were not simply individuals with exceptional attention; they were representative devices through which a culture imagined itself. That regime did not disappear. It persists in the

continuation of broadcast logics, in professional publicity, and in the continuing force of large cultural narratives. But it has been eroded by a presentational regime in which billions produce their own publicness through everyday acts of publication. The key difference is not merely scale; it is structure. Presentational culture repositions the self as a producer of media objects and as a manager of audiences. It asks the ordinary person to undertake the work once outsourced to studios, editors, agencies, and publicists: selecting, framing, captioning, timing, circulating, responding, and constantly recalibrating the public face. In such a regime, persona is not 'who someone is'. It is how someone becomes navigable in public. It is the form of the self designed for contact with a collective. Persona is not a lie in the moral sense, nor is it simply a mask hiding a true interior. It is better thought of as a strategy for being readable. It offers continuity across contexts that are otherwise fragmented. Yet it is also a fiction in the technical sense: a constructed figure that organises visibility. The paradox is that this fiction becomes the operational reality, because platforms and institutions increasingly treat the constructed figure as the person. In everyday life, the persona becomes the unit that circulates, the unit that is evaluated, and the unit that is stored. This is why surveillance is not an external threat added to an otherwise private world. Surveillance is internal to the formation of persona. Presentational systems normalise a condition in which one's public self is shaped under an anticipated gaze. What matters is less whether someone is actually watching at any moment than the fact that the possibility of watching becomes an organising principle. The self is composed in relation to the imagined observer, which includes known observers and unknown ones, intimate audiences and institutional ones, peers and authorities. The gaze becomes a kind of silent partner in authorship. The result is a culture of pre-emptive adjustment: people learn to perform not only for approval but for safety, employability, and reputational continuity. The self becomes an edited project. Yet the older metaphor of an all-seeing eye is not fully adequate. The contemporary condition is better captured as a set of intense, partial, localised illuminations. The system does not necessarily 'know everything' about a person in a godlike way; it creates zones of heightened legibility where certain actions, affiliations, and expressions are captured in fine detail. The light is bright, but the beam is narrow. This narrowness matters, because it changes the ethics and the psychology of selfhood. People do not fear omniscience; people adapt to selective visibility. They begin to live as if what counts as real is what the beam can register. The self is shaped by what can be shown, tracked, and interpreted.

Celebrity is crucial here, not because persona equals fame, but because fame provides the tutorial. Celebrity culture functions as a pedagogy of public identity. It teaches successive generations how to assemble a public self through consumer objects, style cues, emotional displays, and narrative fragments. What used to appear as the exceptional labour of the famous becomes the general labour of everyone. The celebrity figure models the relationship between performance and attention, between intimacy and distance, between private life and public fascination. In the presentational regime, that modelling is absorbed into everyday practice. People learn that a public self is not simply possessed; it must be maintained. Visibility becomes an activity rather than a condition. This pedagogical function extends into the economics of selfhood. The public self is no longer only a social phenomenon; it becomes a transactional one. Platforms reward continuity, frequency, recognisability, and engagement. The persona becomes a portfolio, a living dossier that stands in for the person in a range of encounters: professional, social, romantic, institutional. The more work becomes temporary, project-based, and informal, the more identity has to travel in advance of the body. The public self becomes a credential and a risk profile at once. People are advised early that future opportunities will be shaped by present traces. This anticipatory structure intensifies self-monitoring, because persona is not only about

expressing who one is but about securing what one might be permitted to become. The labour of persona is therefore not ornamental. It is a new mode of work that blends emotional management, tactical communication, and aesthetic presentation. This is why the language of branding becomes tempting: it captures the way a person is urged to treat their own identity as an asset requiring coherence, differentiation, and market fit. But the deeper philosophical point is that the self is reconfigured as a managerial object. Instead of identity being primarily an existential question—how to live, what to value, how to belong—it becomes an operational question—how to appear, how to perform, how to remain searchable, how to avoid reputational collapse. Persona becomes the battlefield where human meaning is negotiated under the pressure of machine-readable life.

The intensification of surveillance sharpens this pressure. The revelations about state and corporate monitoring demonstrate that the public self is not only voluntarily disclosed; it is also harvested, inferred, and recombined. But the striking feature of the contemporary response is not mass withdrawal. People rarely treat the system as optional. The response is often a mixture of resignation and experimentation: a willingness to continue participating while attempting small tactics of control. People adjust settings, curate audiences, segment identities, delete posts, perform innocence, cultivate ambiguity, or embrace full visibility as a form of power. This is not simply complacency; it is a collective attempt to develop literacies for survival inside an infrastructure that is already integral to work, friendship, culture, and recognition. The idea of digital objects clarifies what is at stake. A persona is built out of objects that persist: images, messages, reactions, links, tags, location traces, and other forms of metadata. These objects do not remain in the control of the person who made them. They can be copied, redistributed, taken out of context, recombined, or interpreted by audiences far removed from the original situation. The public self becomes an archive that does not forget in the way bodies forget. This archive is often forgiving when it flatters and unforgiving when it condemns. It creates a new kind of time: the past can be reactivated as if it were present. Persona management becomes, in part, a practice of negotiating with this persistent past, attempting to keep the archive coherent, respectable, and strategically useful. The entertainment forms that normalised surveillance are significant not because they ‘caused’ this condition, but because they trained attention to accept it. The domestication of being watched was rehearsed as amusement, embarrassment, confession, and spectacle. In contemporary presentational culture, this training is generalised. Streaming, vlogging, and constant posting transform each phone into both a camera and a broadcast station, and the boundary between recording and living blurs. The ordinary person can become the subject and the operator of surveillance at the same time. This produces a strange moral reversal: being watched becomes proof of existence, and privacy becomes a form of disappearance. The desire for visibility is no longer only vanity; it is also a quest for social reality.

Affect is the silent engine that makes these systems work. The presentational regime does not rely only on rational persuasion or coherent meaning. It relies on intensities: shame, pride, outrage, belonging, envy, admiration, and the quick pulse of recognition that comes from being seen. Memes, hashtags, and compressed emotional emblems function as shorthand for collective feeling. They allow people to attach themselves to clusters of emotion and to recognise others through shared signals. These clusters are not merely social; they are also economic. Systems learn to associate expressions with likely desires, fears, and vulnerabilities. Emotion becomes legible and therefore tradable. The persona becomes the site where a person’s affective life is translated into patterns that can be circulated back as advertisements,

recommendations, warnings, invitations, and forms of algorithmic attention. Yet the same affective clustering also enables public contestation. The presentational regime inherits the inequalities of representational culture: privilege, stereotype, gaze, exclusion, and the familiar asymmetries of who gets to appear as complex and who is reduced to a type. But it also opens channels through which those asymmetries are challenged in public. When people build persona networks around shared grievances, shared identities, or shared demands for recognition, intercommunication becomes a field of collective power. This does not guarantee emancipation, and it often produces new conflicts, but it does show that persona is not only a tool of control. It is also a space where agency is negotiated, sometimes against the very infrastructures that profit from it. The contemporary significance of persona, then, is not that people have become fake, nor that authenticity has vanished. It is that the self has become a public project composed under surveillance, circulated as objects, and organised by affective economies. Intercommunication names the condition in which communication and media fuse, and persona names the form the self takes in order to live inside that fusion. People now move between public and private not as stable territories but as adjustable settings. The everyday self is increasingly performed, monitored, and edited because the world asks for legibility. The question is no longer whether people have masks, but which masks are required, who benefits from their visibility, and what kind of human life remains possible when the public self becomes the main currency of belonging.

Marshall, P.D., Moore, C. and Barbour, K. (2020) Persona Studies: An Introduction. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

11. Imago Sine Corpore

Masks of Evidence: Methods of Revealing the Public Self

In Persona Studies (P. David Marshall, Christopher Moore, Kim Barbour), the study of persona begins not with celebrity but with visibility itself. A public identity is never discovered; it is assembled. What appears as personality is in fact an arrangement of signals distributed across situations, audiences, and technologies. The task of analysis therefore is not to discover who a person really is, but to observe how coherence is manufactured from fragments. Consistency and contradiction become the primary clues. A public self exists only through repetition, and every repetition risks deviation. The researcher enters not a stable biography but a field of performances, each slightly displaced from the previous one. The modern environment multiplies these performances into countless small audiences. The self now circulates through micro-publics rather than a single mass public, and each of these spaces demands a slightly different emphasis. The individual learns to translate existence into presentation: gestures become signals, preferences become statements, and silence becomes strategy. To study such a figure requires immersion rather than distance. Observation must occur where the persona lives — within conversations, images, replies, and reactions — because identity today is inseparable from interaction. A person does not first exist and then communicate; communication is the condition under which existence becomes socially legible.

The first difficulty appears immediately: the observer also possesses a persona. Any attempt to analyze another inevitably reflects the structures of one's own presentation. For this reason, investigation begins with reflexivity. By examining how one constructs a profile, edits a message, or anticipates an audience, the mechanics of public identity become visible. Self-analysis reveals that expression is rarely spontaneous. It is guided by expectation, feedback,

and imagined reception. The public self is therefore a prediction machine, continuously modelling the reactions of others and adjusting its behaviour accordingly. Such reflection transforms everyday activity into data. Personal narratives, photographs, and posts form an archive of decisions about visibility. Each choice answers an implicit question: what version of myself is appropriate here? The answer is never final. It is revised through feedback loops. A message that produces affirmation is repeated; one that produces discomfort is abandoned. Over time, behaviour aligns less with internal intention and more with anticipated response. The persona stabilizes as a habit of anticipation. From this point the inquiry can move outward to others. Conversations become more than content; they become accounts of experience. When individuals describe how they present themselves, they reveal not facts but interpretations of their own behaviour. The analyst accepts these accounts not as objective truth but as meaningful self-descriptions. The goal is not verification but understanding. Public identity is already interpretative; studying it requires another layer of interpretation rather than correction. Context becomes decisive. A gesture online is never isolated; it echoes earlier cultural forms. Every recognizable role — artist, professional, activist, parent — carries historical expectations that shape how performances are understood. Individuals inherit these templates and modify them slightly. The result is familiarity combined with difference, allowing recognition without sameness. Identity therefore resembles a quotation: original in arrangement, borrowed in vocabulary.

Observation within digital environments intensifies this process. Continuous attention to posts, responses, and interactions produces an intimacy similar to physical presence. Screenshots, archives, and timelines freeze moments that would otherwise disappear. These captured fragments are not neutral records but perspectives: each depends on what was visible to a particular observer at a particular time. The archive becomes a memory of interpretation rather than a record of reality. Through accumulation, a narrative emerges — not the person's life, but the pattern of appearances that constitute their public existence. Dialogue deepens this narrative. When individuals recount their experiences of presenting themselves, they translate behaviour into story. Anecdotes replace statistics. The persona becomes meaningful through remembered situations: embarrassment, success, misunderstanding, recognition. Such stories reveal motivation more clearly than metrics. They demonstrate that public identity is lived as an emotional practice rather than a technical one. The person negotiates belonging, authority, and recognition simultaneously. Yet identity is rarely solitary. Groups often collaborate, consciously or not, in shaping each other's presentation. Collective reflection can expose this dynamic. Participants compare intentions, observe differences between perception and expectation, and experiment with alternative forms of appearance. Change occurs through cycles: observe the current state, interpret its meaning, modify behaviour, and observe again. The public self becomes an ongoing project rather than a fixed attribute. Within groups, expertise shifts. The researcher no longer interprets alone but facilitates understanding among participants. Each member possesses privileged knowledge of their own experience. Analysis becomes cooperative construction of meaning. The purpose is not merely description but transformation: individuals learn how their presentation functions and adjust it deliberately. The persona becomes consciously engineered rather than unconsciously reproduced.

Reputation introduces another scale. Instead of a single individual, one observes networks of related figures whose identities intersect. Shared professions, interests, or affiliations create collective patterns. By mapping connections, hierarchies of influence emerge. Recognition travels through association. A person's status depends partly on proximity to others already

recognized. The public self therefore operates within a relational economy: value accumulates through links rather than isolated achievements. This relational view reveals intermediaries who translate visibility across domains. Some figures connect otherwise separate audiences, carrying prestige from one context into another. Their role demonstrates that identity circulates socially before it settles individually. A reputation is not possessed but distributed, maintained by the attention of others. To understand a single persona requires understanding the web that sustains it. Digital systems make this web measurable. Networks can be visualized as clusters, flows, and densities. These images convert invisible relations into visible patterns. They show that social space is not continuous but clustered: overlapping groups rather than unified publics. The self occupies several positions simultaneously, appearing differently in each cluster. Visualizations therefore reveal multiplicity rather than unity. The individual is a crossing point of audiences.

However, such diagrams never replace interpretation. Numbers describe frequency, not meaning. A message shared widely may be misunderstood; a rarely seen message may define identity profoundly. Quantitative traces require qualitative reading. The analyst moves constantly between measurement and interpretation, acknowledging that both are partial. The persona exists between statistics and narrative. As individuals learn to read these patterns, a new competence emerges: awareness of one's own mediated presence. People begin to monitor the distribution of their expressions, noticing when certain aspects dominate perception. This self-observation resembles an external gaze turned inward. The person watches themselves as others might watch them. Agency increases but so does constraint, because every action anticipates analysis. Platforms transform this awareness into value. Every expression generates data that can be categorized, predicted, and exchanged. The smallest gesture becomes informational property. Identity thus enters an economic circuit: presentation produces traces, traces produce profiles, profiles produce profit. The persona is no longer only social but also infrastructural. To exist publicly is to generate resources for systems that organize attention. Large datasets require cartography rather than narrative alone. Multiple visual maps are needed to approximate the complexity of cultural space. Each map reveals different clusters and boundaries, none definitive. Culture appears as overlapping territories rather than clear divisions. The public self navigates these territories, adapting its signals to each environment. Stability becomes the ability to remain recognizable across change. From these observations emerges a broader literacy. One learns first to recognize personal participation in shaping a public image, then to interpret others within networks, and finally to perceive how systems reorganize identities for purposes beyond individual control. Understanding persona therefore means understanding one's position within technological, cultural, and economic structures simultaneously. The study of persona ultimately demonstrates that identity today is not hidden behind appearances but produced through them. The self is not revealed by removing masks but constituted by their arrangement. Methods of analysis — reflection, dialogue, mapping, and visualization — do not uncover an authentic core. They illuminate the processes through which authenticity is claimed. The public self persists as a dynamic equilibrium between intention and interpretation, between expression and reception, between individuality and infrastructure.

Marshall, P.D., Moore, C. and Barbour, K. (2020) Persona Studies: An Introduction. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

The Play Becomes Public: From Avatar to Networked Persona

In Persona Studies, play is treated not as escape but as rehearsal. Digital games did not merely entertain; they provided one of the first structured laboratories for experimenting with identity. At the beginning this experimentation remained sealed within fictional worlds. A character moved, fought, collected objects, and disappeared once the device was turned off. The experience was intense but private. Yet even in those early moments a transformation had begun: the self discovered that it could be redesigned. The first public trace of this redesign was almost trivial. A set of initials attached to a score appeared on a machine and stayed visible to strangers. The player inscribed existence into a shared memory. That small inscription marked a threshold. The person was no longer only acting inside the system but was recognized by others through the system. A reputation emerged from repetition. Each attempt to surpass a previous score was not only a competition against the machine but a negotiation with visibility. The individual learned that performance could outlive presence.

As games moved into homes and networks connected them, the character became customizable. One could choose appearance, abilities, and role. Identity ceased to be fixed and became assembled through options. The fictional body became a tool for testing possibilities: gender could shift, morality could change, personality could be exaggerated or restrained. The digital environment functioned as a mirror that allowed variation without consequence. Here multiplicity was not theoretical but practical. The self existed as alternatives. Network connection altered the meaning of this multiplicity. When players encountered one another, the character no longer served only narrative immersion but social recognition. A figure in a virtual world represented someone beyond the world. Anonymity made this representation flexible. One could act differently from everyday life and observe the reactions of others. The experience revealed that identity is negotiated through perception. Who one is depends on what others accept as consistent behaviour. The figure controlling action inside the game gradually became an interface rather than a disguise. It produced presence across distance. Interaction created archives: messages, movements, decisions, all recorded. Existence became persistent in digital form. A gesture performed once could be revisited and evaluated later. The self therefore acquired continuity independent of the physical body. Memory migrated from personal recollection to shared record. This persistence transformed the relation between player and character. Instead of the character representing the person, the person began to be understood through traces of activity. Achievements, collections, and histories became evidence of personality. The game world expanded outward into forums, profiles, and communication channels. Identity detached from a single narrative and attached to a series of actions across environments. The individual became a pattern of behaviour.

With this shift, play escaped its boundaries. Profiles aggregated experiences from multiple worlds into a single visible biography. Lists of games, time invested, accomplishments earned, and communities joined formed a new autobiographical genre. The player no longer existed only within play sessions but as a continuous public presence. The character was one element among many. The persona emerged as the synthesis. Such a persona operated across contexts simultaneously. Discussion boards, streaming broadcasts, and recorded play sessions presented interpretations of play rather than play itself. Spectatorship became participation. Watching someone play produced identification comparable to playing. Performance extended beyond success or failure in the game to include commentary, humour, and reaction. The individual learned to act for an audience as much as for the system. From this environment arose conflict. A collective label once used casually hardened into a defensive identity. Some participants

protected a narrow image of who belonged, enforcing boundaries through hostility. The public persona of the player turned combative, defining itself by exclusion. Harassment campaigns revealed that identity organized around media practices can become ideological. The shared activity of play became a shared territory to defend. Yet the same conditions produced alternative forms. Costuming, live broadcasting, and collaborative communities demonstrated that play could generate creative affiliation rather than aggression. The individual could embody characters physically, narrate experiences publicly, or organize spectators into cooperative groups. The persona diversified into performer, commentator, artist, and organizer. Instead of a single stereotype, a field of roles appeared. Parallel to this diversification, creation itself became accessible. Modification of existing worlds allowed participants to redesign rules and aesthetics. Alteration transformed consumers into contributors. The boundary between player and maker weakened. A culture of sharing techniques and improvements replaced passive reception. The act of changing a game became a statement about the values embedded within it.

Independent creation followed naturally. Without large institutional backing, small groups presented personal experiences through interactive form. The resulting works often resembled diaries rather than spectacles. Play became a medium for autobiographical expression. The creator's life informed mechanics and narrative. Audiences engaged not only with a system but with another person's perspective. The product and the producer fused into a recognizable presence. Such creators depended on communication as much as design. They documented development, shared fragments, requested feedback, and cultivated communities before completion. The unfinished work functioned as conversation. Followers participated in shaping the final form. Production became collective anticipation. The persona of the creator emerged alongside the creation itself. Performance intensified this relationship. Broadcasting work, discussing decisions, and responding to audiences required continuous presentation. The creator acted publicly not merely to promote but to exist within the community. Identity became inseparable from interaction. To be recognized required constant visibility, and visibility required constant narrative. Networks reveal the structure underlying this visibility. Individuals cluster around shared interests, exchanging attention. Each interaction reinforces connection, and connection distributes recognition. The persona exists not as an isolated figure but as a node within circulating interest. Value arises from relation. Recognition is maintained collectively.

Economic structures adapt to this circulation. Early participation, crowdfunding, and collaborative testing convert engagement into support. Participants invest in development and receive symbolic prestige in return. The distinction between audience and contributor blurs. Identity attaches to involvement. To belong is to help bring something into existence. Across these transformations the meaning of play changes. It no longer describes a temporary activity but a continuous mode of being publicly present. Records of participation accumulate into biography. Communities sustain reputation. Systems monetize attention. The self becomes a project maintained through interaction with platforms and people. What began as a fictional experiment ends as social infrastructure. The avatar becomes one artifact among many composing a recognizable figure. Collections, conversations, and collaborations define identity more than appearance within any single environment. Play teaches that the self is modular and composable, but networked life makes that lesson permanent. The contemporary persona is therefore born from rehearsal. By trying on different roles in structured environments, individuals learned that identity could be designed. Once connected to persistent networks, design became expectation. The individual now lives within a continuous feedback loop

between expression and reception. The game did not simulate life; it anticipated the conditions under which life would later be organized.

The Mirror Learns to Judge: Persona in the Age of Continuous Visibility

In Persona Studies: An Introduction by P. David Marshall, Christopher Moore, and Kim Barbour, a recurring cultural metaphor is the screen as mirror: not a passive reflection but an active reconstruction of the self. Contemporary devices no longer merely display information; they reorganise identity. The dark surface that lights up on command resembles a reflective object, yet what it returns is never the person who looked into it but a processed version adapted to technical, social, and economic expectations. One confronts not oneself but a system's interpretation of oneself. The fictional imagination anticipated this condition by depicting a world in which memory, reputation, and perception become technological functions. The possibility of replaying every lived moment transforms recollection into verification. Memory ceases to be interpretive and becomes evidentiary. Instead of forgetting, the subject audits existence. Suspicion replaces trust because events are no longer experienced once but endlessly re-experienced as proof. The individual becomes archivist of personal life, and the archive becomes judge. What once sustained intimacy through ambiguity collapses into calculation. When experience can be replayed perfectly, forgiveness becomes irrational and relationships become investigations. The result is not knowledge but obsession: the more reality is confirmed, the less it is livable. Another imagined configuration replaces memory with rating. Each gesture receives an immediate evaluation, and evaluation determines opportunity. Behaviour no longer emerges from preference but from anticipation of judgement. Social existence becomes performance under continuous scoring. The person smiles not because of emotion but because reputation demands emotional display. Courtesy becomes currency. Personality becomes compliance. In this environment sincerity is indistinguishable from strategy because both produce identical visible outcomes. The self adapts to the metric and gradually internalises it. Value migrates from character to score. These speculative worlds appear exaggerated, yet they clarify a structural transformation already present. Public identity historically belonged to a limited class of visible figures whose behaviour defined cultural importance. Surveillance of prominent personalities provided a shared hierarchy of attention. Observation established significance. The public watched a few and thereby agreed, implicitly, on what mattered. The spectacle of the famous organised conversation.

Networked media dissolved this concentration. Visibility multiplied until everyone became observable. Instead of a pyramid of attention there emerged a dense field of micro-observations. Each individual generates signals for others and receives signals in return. The role once occupied by celebrities spreads across the population. Recognition fragments into countless small recognitions. What was exceptional becomes routine. This expansion produces a new condition: permanent mutual monitoring. People no longer simply communicate; they continuously interpret each other's communicative traces. Approval and disapproval are recorded as numerical feedback. The meaning of an action lies less in its intention than in its measurable reception. Behaviour adjusts accordingly. The subject anticipates reaction before acting and gradually acts for reaction alone. The gaze is no longer external; it is distributed across peers and internalised as expectation. The environment hosting this interaction appears public yet operates through private ownership. Digital platforms resemble open plazas but function as regulated infrastructures. They permit expression while recording it, encourage

participation while structuring it. The individual enters voluntarily yet leaves data involuntarily. Freedom and capture coexist. The space feels communal but remains administered. One participates in a shared world whose rules are written elsewhere. This ambiguous territory alters agency. To exist socially requires strategic presentation. The individual learns to navigate visibility by adjusting tone, timing, and disclosure. Communication becomes calibrated exposure. Too little presence results in disappearance; too much authenticity risks sanction. The self is negotiated through constant adjustment. Identity becomes situational management rather than stable character. Within this structure information about the person acquires independent life. Patterns of behaviour generate predictions that precede action. Suggestions, advertisements, and recommendations appear not as external impositions but as anticipations of desire. The individual encounters an image of future preference constructed from past activity. The mirror no longer reflects what has been but proposes what will be. Autonomy shifts from deciding to recognising oneself in decisions already modelled.

The accumulation of such modelling produces precarity. If recognition depends on continuous activity, inactivity becomes erasure. Presence requires maintenance. The individual must remain visible to remain socially real. Communication turns into labour: posts, responses, updates, acknowledgements. Silence resembles absence, and absence resembles irrelevance. Social belonging therefore demands ongoing performance. Yet within this demand lies a paradoxical freedom. Because identity is constructed through presentation, it can also be redesigned. Individuals experiment with tone, community, and narrative, discovering possibilities unavailable in fixed roles. Strategic expression becomes a form of adaptation. Agency survives not by resisting mediation but by learning its logic. Awareness of the system enables selective participation. Understanding this condition requires literacy in visibility. One must recognise how actions become records, how records become evaluations, and how evaluations shape opportunity. Without such awareness, participation drifts toward obsessive retrospection or compulsive approval-seeking. With awareness, however, the same structures can be navigated rather than merely endured. The contemporary self therefore exists between archive and audience. Every gesture is both memory and message. The challenge is not to recover a pre-mediated identity but to manage a mediated one consciously. The mirror will not disappear; it has become the environment. The central transformation described throughout this text is not technological but ontological. The person no longer appears primarily as a biological or psychological unity but as a visible trajectory across systems of recording and response. Identity persists as a pattern of recognitions distributed over time. Continuity depends less on inner coherence than on sustained legibility to others. The self is maintained by remaining interpretable.

In earlier societies reputation emerged slowly and was limited by memory. Today memory has been externalised and accelerated. The past accompanies the present continuously. One lives alongside previous versions of oneself that remain active in circulation. The past cannot disappear because it functions as material for ongoing interpretation. Identity therefore stretches temporally in a permanent present where every moment remains accessible. Living becomes coexisting with accumulated selves. This condition transforms responsibility. Actions no longer conclude when performed; they remain operative. Every gesture anticipates indefinite visibility. Behaviour acquires a prospective dimension in which future audiences become implicit participants in current decisions. Ethics shifts from immediate consequence to potential replay. Individuals do not simply act; they consider how the action will persist. Simultaneously, recognition becomes divisible. Instead of belonging to a single community, the individual

participates in overlapping audiences. Each audience interprets the same persona differently, producing multiple simultaneous identities. The task of the contemporary subject is therefore coordination rather than expression. One manages intersections of perception rather than revealing essence. The result is a new social competence: the capacity to remain coherent across fragmentation. Stability no longer means consistency but adaptability without collapse. The successful persona maintains recognisability while adjusting to context. This balancing act defines maturity in a mediated environment. Thus the mirror does not merely reflect society; it reorganises what it means to be someone within it. The future of identity lies neither in rejecting visibility nor surrendering to it but in learning its grammar. Only then can the individual remain author rather than artifact.

Marshall, P.D., Moore, C. and Barbour, K. (2020) Persona Studies: An Introduction. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

Fame as Governance: When Celebrity Becomes a Political Technology

Swapnil Rai's review in the International Journal of Communication (2018) of P. David Marshall's book Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture frames celebrity as a cultural paradox that becomes a political instrument: fame is routinely treated as fleeting and superficial, yet it repeatedly exercises durable influence over what people notice, desire, believe, and ultimately legitimise. The core question is not whether celebrity is 'real' power in the classical sense of law, coercion, or administration, but how a surface phenomenon can nonetheless organise collective attention so effectively that it begins to function like authority. The problem is dialectical: celebrity looks weightless, and yet it moves weight. It appears ephemeral, and yet it persists as a system. It seems irrational, and yet it produces predictable effects. The resolution of this paradox requires a shift from judging celebrity as a moral failure of culture to analysing it as a social form that translates visibility into value and value into influence.

Celebrity can be understood as a public individual produced through a triangular negotiation among audience, media, and the person who becomes visible. This implies that celebrity is not a property inside the individual but a relationship distributed across institutions and publics. It is not merely a person but a sign: a condensed figure through which the collective rehearses fantasies of individuality, success, freedom, rebellion, desirability, and exception. If celebrity is a sign, its power is semiotic before it is political: it governs the imagination of what counts as a meaningful life. The more a culture prizes individualism, the more it produces elevated individuals to embody that value. In this sense celebrity does not float above capitalism; it belongs to it, because capitalism requires that value appear personal and consumable. The celebrity is the person-form of commodity logic: an individual packaged as a circulating object of attention. A democratic consumer culture intensifies this logic, because the crowd becomes the decisive mechanism of valuation. In earlier regimes, worth could be stabilised through inherited status, priestly sanction, or sovereign decree. In modern mass society, worth is repeatedly decided, revoked, and reissued by collective recognition. The audience becomes an implicit tribunal of taste. Yet this tribunal is not purely spontaneous. It is organised by industries that manufacture attention through selection, framing, repetition, and affective cues. Celebrity therefore operates as a hybrid of mass judgement and industrial design. What appears as popular choice is also the outcome of institutional choreography. This is why celebrity is best approached as a system rather than as a collection of personalities. A system can persist even

while its individual components are replaceable. To see why the system works, one must understand how the collective itself is conceptualised. The crowd can be imagined as rational public, irrational mob, consuming mass, or participatory audience, and each model implies a different account of celebrity's function. If the crowd is a mob, celebrity looks like manipulation. If the crowd is an audience, celebrity looks like entertainment. If the crowd is a public, celebrity looks like a mode of political communication. The key point is that the meaning of celebrity shifts with the era's dominant idea of the collective. The review indicates a genealogy that passes through moments when mass power becomes historically visible, such as the upheavals that reconfigure class, public life, and the legitimacy of institutions. In such transitions, celebrity is not a distraction from politics but a symptom of the way politics must now appear in order to work.

Within consumer capitalism, celebrity saturates perception so thoroughly that ordinary experience is increasingly filtered through famous figures. This is not because people have become incapable of thinking without celebrities, but because celebrity provides ready-made interpretive shortcuts. A famous figure can stand in for a moral stance, a lifestyle, a tribe, a fantasy of class mobility, a vision of national identity. In this sense celebrity resembles a portable myth. Its power is 'irrational' only if one assumes that modernity should be organised primarily by reason. In practice, modern life is organised by mixtures of affect, identification, habit, aspiration, resentment, and imitation. Celebrity is one of the principal technologies by which these energies are channelled into stable patterns of attention. The review notes that institutional configurations, social relations, and fan practices together imbue celebrity with symbolic power, and that this symbolic power is never fixed: it mutates because the public sphere mutates. Celebrity remains effective precisely because it can be re-signified quickly. It is flexible power. Different entertainment industries cultivate this power through different aesthetics of distance and intimacy. Film stardom traditionally depends on aura: a managed distance that produces mystery. The star is presented as extraordinary, simultaneously visible and unreachable, close enough to be desired yet far enough to remain mythic. This distance generates an aspirational space in which the audience can project fantasies without the irritation of ordinary familiarity. Television celebrity, by contrast, is built on the feeling of proximity. The personality is allowed into the home repeatedly, becoming a habitual presence. The medium's domestic rhythm produces an affect of trust: the figure feels 'known'. This familiarity is not merely psychological; it is infrastructural. Television creates a recurring relationship with a persona, and repetition becomes intimacy. In this arrangement, the TV celebrity can function as a cultural interpreter: someone who narrates the world back to the audience in a digestible moral tone, aligning everyday confusion with a stable voice. Music celebrity introduces another axis: authenticity. The famous musician is expected to embody a 'real' voice even when the voice is technologically mediated, edited, amplified, and distributed by industrial mechanisms. Here authenticity is not an absence of technology but a particular style of technologised presence. The voice becomes a signature of uniqueness, and uniqueness becomes a commodity. The persona is judged not only by skill but by the felt truth of performance. This helps explain why music celebrity can mobilise intense identification: the audience experiences the performer as expressing an inner self, and then adopts that expression as a resource for their own self-making.

These industrial differences, however, do not fragment the system; they diversify its techniques. The system's deeper achievement is to configure celebrity into modern subjectivity. The audience does not merely watch celebrity; it learns from celebrity how to be a person in public.

Celebrity becomes pedagogy. It teaches how to narrate the self, how to manage exposure, how to convert private life into public meaning, how to signal belonging, how to stylise authenticity, how to perform intimacy. In this way the system trains individuals to become minor versions of what they consume. Modern subjectivity, under this regime, is partly a competence in self-presentation. One becomes an apprentice of visibility. The political significance of this becomes clear when celebrity techniques migrate into governance. Politics no longer operates only through programmes, institutions, and rational persuasion; it also operates through affective embodiment. The politician becomes a persona that must be consumed. Political legitimacy is increasingly mediated through narrative and aura: the leader must feel authentic, familiar, exceptional, or rebellious in ways that resemble entertainment personas. The review highlights the emergence of political celebrities as well as celebrities who become politicians, suggesting that the same system that manufactures fame can manufacture authority. In this configuration, leaders can become 'legitimation commodities': objects whose circulation in media stabilises belief in their right to rule. They can produce affect while maintaining distinction. They can appear 'one of us' while remaining elevated. This is the signature trick of contemporary populism: intimacy without equality, familiarity without accountability. Once politics is reorganised by celebrity logics, public discourse shifts from deliberation to attention management. Conflict becomes spectacle because spectacle is efficient at producing engagement. Issues become personal because persona is easier to consume than policy. Trust becomes aesthetic because credibility is performed through media habits rather than earned through institutional demonstration. The political sphere begins to resemble entertainment not because citizens are childish, but because the system of attention rewards what is narratively and affectively gripping. In such a world, the line between democratic recognition and market demand becomes difficult to maintain. The people appear sovereign, yet sovereignty is routed through platforms and publicity machines that structure what can be seen and how it will be felt.

At the same time, the review raises a tension inside the concept of celebrity itself: if celebrity connotes transience, how should one understand forms of fame that endure? The question is not only empirical but philosophical. Transient fame is the quick flare of attention; lasting stardom is the slow consolidation of symbolic capital. Both operate within the same system, but they may operate with different temporalities. One could say that celebrity is the grammar of recognition and stardom is its long-form narrative. The difference matters because durable figures do more than entertain; they become reference points across generations, stabilising cultural memory. Yet even lasting stardom can be read as a particular effect of the system's ability to refresh meaning around an enduring sign. Durability may therefore be less about inherent greatness and more about the capacity of institutions and publics to repeatedly re-invest attention in a figure as circumstances change. The final critique concerns technological convergence. As platforms merge, visibility becomes constant, interactive, and measurable. Public intimacy intensifies. Attention becomes granular data. This alters celebrity perception because the public no longer only receives the celebrity image; it participates in its circulation, correction, and punishment. The system becomes more immediate and more volatile. It becomes easier to rise and easier to fall, yet also easier to remain present through continuous micro-appearances. The question of power therefore becomes inseparable from the architecture of platforms: who can be seen, by whom, and under what algorithmic conditions.

Celebrity power should be understood as a modern mechanism for converting collective attention into cultural and political force. Its apparent superficiality is not a weakness but its

operating principle, because surfaces are where publics meet. The system does not require deep belief; it requires habitual recognition. Once recognition becomes habitual, it becomes a resource: for markets, for media industries, and increasingly for politics. The crucial insight is that celebrity is not the opposite of democracy but one of its shadow forms under consumer capitalism: a regime in which the crowd's recognition functions as value, and value can be weaponised as legitimacy. The question, then, is not whether celebrity should disappear, but what kind of public life remains possible when visibility is treated as evidence of worth. In that environment, political authority can be manufactured with the same tools that manufacture entertainment, and the public sphere risks becoming a theatre where governance is performed as affect. The task for analysis is to keep separating popularity from legitimacy, recognition from truth, and the pleasures of persona from the responsibilities of power, otherwise the most decisive political acts will be decided not by argument or justice, but by who can most successfully become a sign.

Swapnil Rai (2018) 'Review of P. David Marshall, Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture', International Journal of Communication, 12, pp. 2263–2265.

12. Dies Facierum Identicarum

Inside the Celebrity-Industrial Complex

The expression 'celebrity exploitation machine' designates a contemporary media formation in which public figures are processed into commodities of attention, scandal, and moral conflict. It names a system rather than a story: a complex interdependence of social media platforms, legacy journalism, public relations industries, advertisers, and networked fandoms that collectively transform celebrity life into a renewable economic resource. Within this celebrity-industrial complex, fact and fiction are no longer stable categories but interchangeable narrative tools, mobilised according to their capacity to circulate, provoke alignment, and sustain visibility. Scandal in this context is not a deviation from normal media practice but one of its most reliable products, because conflict amplifies faster than explanation and outrage sustains attention more effectively than closure. The celebrity-industrial complex can be illustrated by the June 1978 cover of Hustler magazine of a woman literally being ground into meat. While the image originally circulated in a context dominated by second-wave feminism and debates about the subjection of women, today it functions as a broader allegory of celebrity exploitation in which the body being processed by the media machine can no longer be assumed to be exclusively female. The decade in which the cover appeared was marked by expanding feminist politics, symbolised in Britain by the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 as the first woman prime minister. Against this backdrop, the Hustler image could be read by many feminists as a provocation or even a regression, a pornographic assertion that women were still treated as consumable objects despite social progress. Hustler, founded in 1974 by Larry Flynt as a populist alternative to Playboy and Penthouse, positioned itself as deliberately confrontational, rejecting refined eroticism in favour of blunt shock value. The June 1978 cover depicts oiled legs emerging from a tabletop meat grinder, with minced flesh collecting below. The typography, giveaway slogans, pricing, and the 'Last all meat issue' stamp frame the body as a commodity graded and packaged for consumption. At the time, the image was almost universally interpreted as an attack on women's dignity, especially given the juxtaposition with Flynt's claim that women would no longer be treated like pieces of meat. Yet the image acquires a different resonance today. In a media environment defined by the celebrity-industrial

complex, the grinder no longer processes only women; it processes fame itself. Any celebrity body, regardless of gender, can be fed into the machine of scandal, commentary, fandom, and algorithmic circulation. What once symbolised the sexual objectification of women now reads as a metaphor for the extraction of attention from public figures more generally. Male stars, non-binary influencers, and online personalities are equally subject to dissection, remixing, ridicule, and moral judgement, their images fragmented into clips, memes, and reaction loops. Hall's theory of representation is useful here, since the image contains multiple layers that shift with cultural context. Detached from its original feminist controversy, the cover can be re-read not only as pornography but as a prophetic diagram of the contemporary attention economy. The body in the grinder is no longer simply a woman reduced to meat; it is the celebrity subject reduced to content. The fetishistic framing of the legs once signalled erotic availability, but now it also signals vulnerability within a system that thrives on exposure and degradation. In this sense, the Hustler cover has outlived its original provocation and become an emblem of a world in which exploitation is no longer gender-specific but structural, embedded in the everyday mechanics of visibility itself.

The idea of the celebrity-industrial complex was first articulated by Maureen Orth in "The Importance of Being Famous" in 2003, where celebrity was described as a symbiotic relationship between individuals who seek visibility and corporate structures that require recognisable figures to anchor brands, headlines, and marketable identities. The celebrity may be elevated for distinctive appeal or pulled into the spotlight through an event that generates sympathy or condemnation, but in both cases the figure becomes a site of intensified media investment. Well-funded distribution systems convert personal life into public narrative, while scrutiny itself becomes a form of capital, capable of producing income, promotion, and momentum for future projects. Attention expands outward to encompass affiliated products, campaigns, and causes, turning reputation into infrastructure. This process is sustained not only by media producers but also by audiences. Fandom operates as a mode of identity formation in which values, gestures, and attitudes associated with a celebrity are adopted as materials for belonging. Participation is no longer limited to watching or reading; it involves interpreting, defending, attacking, remixing, and circulating fragments of a person's life as if they were ideological tokens. Under such conditions, truth is displaced by alignment. What matters is not what happened, but which version of events one inhabits and promotes.

A revealing reflection on this system appears in a 2018 Vox interview by Eric Johnson with Vanity Fair editor Radhika Jones, where the magazine is described as having played a major role in the creation of the celebrity-industrial complex while also claiming responsibility for holding it to account. Jones acknowledges the tension between access-driven celebrity journalism and investigative scrutiny, noting that in the contemporary media environment access is no longer the ultimate value. The question becomes whether proximity to celebrities brings one closer to truth or merely reproduces the logic of the system itself. Her remarks expose a structural contradiction: the same institutions that helped build the machinery of celebrity are now attempting to interrogate it from within, even as their economic survival depends on its continued operation. This chapter uses the concept of the celebrity exploitation machine to analyse this contradiction. It treats the celebrity-industrial complex as a communicative order in which personal life is converted into serial narrative, moral conflict into spectacle, and ambiguity into profit. The machine does not merely report on fame; it organises reality around it, draining human experience of context and reissuing it as content calibrated for circulation.

In this environment, exploitation is no longer hidden behind glamour but embedded in the everyday routines of media production and consumption.

The next sections retell "Hollywood Vampires: Johnny Depp, Amber Heard, and the Celebrity Exploitation Machine" as a work of celebrity philosophy, drawing on Kelly Loudenberg and Makiko Wholey's analysis to treat the case not as gossip but as a model of how visibility is manufactured, traded, and weaponised. The emphasis falls on the system: the conversion of private conflict into public currency, the circulation of evidence as entertainment, and the transformation of judgement into a form of collective participation. Individual identities remain secondary to the mechanisms that shape them, because the machine does not require particular people so much as it requires replaceable figures to process. What follows, then, is a reconstruction of their narrative as an anatomy of extraction, showing how fame becomes the medium through which culture thinks, fights, and feeds.

Loudenberg, K. and Wholey, M. (2025). Hollywood Vampires: Johnny Depp, Amber Heard, and the celebrity exploitation machine. New York: HarperCollins.

Recognition as Consumption: The Metabolism of Celebrity

Fame appears weightless, like a shimmer above ordinary life, yet it functions as a heavy apparatus that reorganises reality around a small number of visible bodies. The modern city of entertainment, with its banal streets and everyday services, coexists with an invisible infrastructure that converts people into images and images into revenue. That infrastructure is not a metaphorical background to celebrity culture; it is the organising principle of it. The celebrity exploitation machine is the name for this principle: a system that feeds on attention, produces stories faster than understanding, and turns private existence into public property. It operates through a network of intermediaries and institutions that specialise in mediation, interpretation, and monetisation, and it survives because the craving for proximity to the famous is endlessly renewable. Most aspirations collapse before reaching the stage of visibility, but those who do become visible enter a different trap, one in which success becomes a vulnerability and recognition becomes a form of enclosure. The famous person is separated from the ordinary world and placed inside an ecosystem of curated contact, controlled access, flattery, and fear, where nothing is simply lived; everything is potentially content. The machine treats fame as a bargain that always demands payment in the same currency: the self. Public recognition promises security, prestige, and material abundance, but the price is to become legible as a commodity. A public figure is no longer merely a person with a profession; a public figure is a package of meanings that can be bought, sold, revised, and discarded. The body, the voice, the habits, the relationships, the supposed 'real self', even the wounds and confessions, become units of exchange in an economy that rewards exposure and punishes ambiguity only when ambiguity fails to circulate. What looks like a life is frequently a portfolio. What looks like personality becomes brand. What looks like intimacy becomes a contract. Even when a person resists this conversion, resistance itself can be processed into market value, because refusal, privacy, and disdain for fame can be stylised as authenticity and sold back to the public as a pose. The machine absorbs every gesture, including anti-commercial gestures, and turns them into proof of uniqueness, which is then leveraged into value. At the centre of this mechanism is not only industry but also ideology. Celebrity does not merely entertain; it becomes a symbolic surface on which political moods and moral debates are projected. A public figure's personal conflict can be transformed into a proxy for a society's anxieties, hopes,

resentments, and desires for judgement. This is how private pain becomes public theatre. In such moments, the celebrity is recruited as an emblem that is made to represent complex questions that exceed any individual life, and the public is invited to treat a human conflict as a referendum on an era. The machine thrives on this enlargement, because it allows the story to travel beyond its particulars and to acquire the gravity of 'something larger'. Yet the enlargement is deceptive: it turns social problems into character plots, structural questions into personality tests, and political dilemmas into fandom contests. The larger meaning promised by celebrity drama is often a substitute for analysis, not a path to it.

The conversion of celebrity conflict into mass entertainment becomes most visible when juridical or institutional processes are turned into serial spectacle. Formal procedures that were designed to stabilise truth through rules and evidence are transformed into episodic narratives designed to sustain attention through suspense. The machine does not merely relay the process; it re-edits it, extracting fragments that can be circulated as moral proof. The court becomes a stage, the testimony becomes performance, and the audience becomes a distributed jury that votes through reactions, shares, mockery, and devotion. The event is no longer anchored to a single room; it migrates across screens and feeds, where it is continuously reframed by commentators and reinterpreted by communities. The outcome is a new form of public participation that resembles civic engagement while functioning as entertainment labour. The public is not simply watching; the public is producing the story in real time by choosing what to amplify, what to ridicule, what to sanctify, and what to forget. This is why the question of truth becomes slippery in the celebrity exploitation machine. The machine does not need a stable distinction between fact and fiction; it benefits from the unstable border. Facts circulate when they can be moralised; fictions circulate when they can be weaponised; both circulate when they can be clipped, captioned, memed, and repeated. A statement does not win because it is verified; it wins because it is useful to a side. In such conditions, truth is displaced by alignment. The primary demand placed upon spectators is not to understand but to choose: to decide which narrative one belongs to and to display that belonging. The machine rewards speed, certainty, and emotional legibility, which means it systematically discourages hesitation, complexity, and the slow work of interpretation. Ambivalence becomes suspicious. Nuance becomes disloyal. Doubt becomes weakness. The system does not merely polarise; it trains people to experience polarisation as virtue. The vampire metaphor clarifies what is happening because the machine is extractive by design. It feeds on vitality, attention, and time. It drains the public figure by converting life into consumable spectacle, and it drains the audience by converting moral energy into endless reaction. The machine never reaches satisfaction, because satisfaction would mean closure, and closure would end engagement. Instead, the machine sustains itself through perpetual deferral. Each scandal produces its own afterlife of commentary, reinterpretation, and sequel logic. Every resolution creates new disputes about whether it was real, fair, sufficient, or staged. Every apology invites a counter-apology. Every confession creates a market for analysis. Every piece of 'evidence' becomes a pretext for further content. The machine therefore requires a continuous flow of affect, and it secures that flow by keeping the public in a state of interpretive mobilisation, always one update away from final clarity that never arrives.

This exploitation is not only sexual, and it is no longer only gendered in the way older pornographic provocation assumed. The contemporary machine can process any celebrity body, any identity, any persona, because the commodity it seeks is not the body as such, but the body as a carrier of narrative and conflict. Older cultures of spectacle often treated women's bodies

as the primary site of public consumption, but the current economy expands extraction across genders while preserving the logic of objectification. The famous body becomes raw material, whether it is admired, mocked, eroticised, sanctified, or condemned. The machine does not require desire alone; it can feed on hatred, pity, disgust, and moral superiority. A public figure can be consumed through adoration or through punishment, and both forms can coexist in the same audience. The point is not the sentiment; the point is the attention. The machine also reorganises the relationship between fame and merchandise. The famous person is miniaturised into objects, images, and brand surfaces that circulate independently of the person's actual life. Celebrity becomes detachable, scalable, and portable. An individual can be multiplied into products that outlive the event that made them visible. This multiplication is not incidental; it is the industrial logic of modern celebrity. The person becomes a platform for franchising, and the franchising becomes a form of social presence. The more the person is distributed across objects, the more the person appears ubiquitous, and the more ubiquitous the person appears, the more 'real' the person feels as a cultural presence, even as the person as a human being becomes more unreachable. What emerges is a closed loop between idols and idolisation. The system hinges on those who are raised up and those who raise them, those who are displayed and those who demand display. The machine would not function without public appetite, yet public appetite is shaped by the machine's incentives. People are invited to imagine that participation is empowerment, that reaction is agency, and that the act of consuming celebrity drama is a form of moral involvement. Yet the more people participate on the machine's terms, the more the machine expands, and the more difficult it becomes to separate genuine ethical concern from the pleasures of spectacle. The celebrity exploitation machine therefore produces a strange moral atmosphere: intense judgement without stable knowledge, passionate allegiance without proportional understanding, and righteous certainty that functions as entertainment. It promises contact with reality while delivering theatre, and it offers a politics of feeling that often replaces a politics of responsibility.

A philosophical reading of this system begins by refusing the comforting idea that exploitation is an exception. Exploitation is the structure. The famous person is not merely harmed by the machine; the famous person is the machine's most visible fuel. The audience is not merely misled by the machine; the audience is trained into the machine's rhythms. The intermediaries are not merely opportunists; they are technicians of circulation. The machine is vampiric because it survives by feeding on the vitality of human life and because it requires that life to remain exposed, interpretable, and endlessly reusable. The decisive question is not whether scandal is real or manufactured, but why the system converts any scandal into profit and why participation in that conversion feels, to so many, like belonging.

Captured Intimacy: The Political Economy of Celebrity Exposure

The celebrity exploitation machine does not operate only through headlines and scandal. Its most decisive work happens in the invisible zones of intimacy, loyalty and psychological alignment, where private relationships are reorganised around visibility and advantage. Fame does not simply surround a person with opportunity; it reconfigures the architecture of trust itself. Old networks of family, friendship and professional continuity dissolve, replaced by a fluid constellation of people whose proximity is measured less by care than by usefulness. The famous subject gradually inhabits a curated social universe in which admiration, access, ambition and dependency are indistinguishable. The result is not simply isolation but enclosure:

the shrinking of the world to a single orbit, inside which the individual is continuously mirrored, affirmed and redirected. This enclosure is reinforced by a form of emotional capture. New relationships do not merely attach themselves to the famous person; they wrap around the celebrity identity itself, fusing intimacy with image-management. Conflicts that would otherwise remain personal are converted into scenes that are later mobilised as evidence, leverage or narrative capital. The machine thus turns relational life into raw material. Arguments, reconciliations, excesses, gestures of care or cruelty all become future assets in a story economy that never stops revising the past. The more volatile the relationship, the richer the archive of usable material. What appears as chaos at the level of experience is often, at the level of circulation, an abundance of content. The system thrives on a specific form of psychological technique that might be described as strategic self-fiction. Public figures are taught, formally or informally, to craft personas that feel spontaneous while remaining legible to the media. This practice is less about lying than about staging plausibility. An identity is assembled from arresting details, contradictory traits and rehearsed anecdotes that can be deployed to maintain curiosity. The self becomes a narrative platform, calibrated for quotation, surprise and intrigue. Under these conditions, sincerity ceases to be a stable property of the person and becomes a variable of performance. The machine rewards those who can oscillate between vulnerability and spectacle, between confession and provocation, because such oscillation sustains the attention cycle.

This strategic self-fiction extends beyond interviews into everyday conduct. Social spaces become audition rooms, friendships become networking events, and spontaneity becomes an investment. The celebrity is encouraged to think of encounters not in terms of shared presence but in terms of potential extraction: who might be useful later, who might amplify a story, who might be persuaded to remember something in a particular way. The result is a moral inversion. The virtues that sustain ordinary social life, discretion, loyalty, patience, gradually lose their value, replaced by visibility, momentum and narrative advantage. Even error can be repurposed, because failure, when properly framed, becomes a dramatic asset. The exploitation machine also colonises the formation of the self long before fame fully arrives. Aspirants are schooled in how to make themselves interesting to the press, how to cultivate angles, how to treat their own lives as reservoirs of marketable peculiarity. Craft is secondary; image is primary. The person learns that to exist in the system is to be quotable, clickable and narratable. Education in this environment does not prioritise mastery of a discipline but mastery of circulation. Success becomes a function of how effectively one can insert oneself into existing attention circuits. In this way, the machine produces its own future fuel: individuals who have internalised the logic of exposure before they are even visible. The role of sexuality in this system is illustrative. The body is not merely displayed; it is coded as a signal of ambition, rebellion, intelligence or authenticity. Sexuality is mobilised as a flexible resource that can be aestheticised, politicised or intellectualised depending on the context. The machine does not punish self-exposure; it monetises it. Yet this monetisation does not liberate the subject from objectification. On the contrary, it refines objectification into a style. The subject appears empowered while remaining structurally consumable. What once functioned as transgression is absorbed as branding, and what once signalled vulnerability is reframed as agency, provided it remains profitable. Parallel to this self-production is the industrial manufacture of myth. The celebrity exploitation machine does not merely record life; it writes legends. Childhoods are retroactively shaped into origin stories, habits are reinterpreted as destinies, accidents become symbols. These myths are not imposed from outside; they are co-produced by public figures, their intermediaries and the media that circulate their narratives. The machine prefers stories

that imply inevitability, that suggest the person was always meant to become what they have become. In doing so, it erases contingency and labour, replacing them with fate. The public consumes not a biography but a script.

The danger of myth is not that it distorts the past but that it fixes the present. Once a persona hardens into a recognisable type, deviation becomes costly. The individual is trapped by the image that originally generated attention. The more recognisable the persona, the more difficult it becomes to evolve without losing relevance. Image becomes a long shadow that follows the person even when the conditions that produced it have vanished. The celebrity is therefore bound not only to the audience but to a version of themselves that is continually reanimated by others. This is a form of temporal captivity: the present is colonised by archived expectations. As intimacy is instrumentalised and identity mythologised, the boundary between personal crisis and public event dissolves. Breakdown, addiction, conflict and instability are not merely tolerated by the machine; they are actively harvested. The exploitation machine is not moral in the sense of seeking good or evil; it is energetic in the sense of seeking intensity. It requires peaks and crashes, reversals and revelations. Stability is uninteresting. Content arises from disturbance. For this reason, those who attempt to retreat from visibility often find that withdrawal itself becomes a story, framed as mystery, scandal or betrayal. The machine does not allow clean exits, because exits interrupt the flow of extraction. The capture is reinforced by institutional structures that treat the famous person as a financial instrument. Revenue streams are projected into the future, expenses are justified by expected returns, and the person becomes a portfolio that must be managed, optimised and defended. When income falters, the solution is rarely simplification; it is acceleration. More projects, more exposure, more risk. The celebrity is urged to outrun their own exhaustion. The result is a paradoxical situation in which immense wealth coexists with chronic precarity, because the machine demands perpetual motion. The famous subject becomes indispensable to a system that is indifferent to the subject's endurance.

Finally, the exploitation machine reproduces itself through ritual. Engagements, celebrations, appearances and declarations are staged as communal moments that appear intimate while functioning as broadcast events. Even attempts to control the narrative through privacy, exclusivity or restriction are folded back into the spectacle as proof of importance. The more tightly access is managed, the more valuable access becomes. Scarcity intensifies desire, and desire intensifies extraction. What looks like a personal milestone is often an industrial checkpoint, a moment when the system renews its claim on the individual. In this way, the celebrity exploitation machine operates less like a factory and more like a web. It does not seize; it entangles. It does not simply exploit; it re-educates, teaching people to see themselves as stories, their relationships as leverage, and their crises as assets. It does not destroy individuality in a single blow; it erodes it through attention, affirmation and dependency. The tragedy is not that people are used, but that they learn to use themselves in advance of being used, anticipating the machine's needs and adjusting their lives accordingly.

Pharmaceutical Governance: Infrastructures of Trust and Opacity

The celebrity exploitation machine does not run only on scandal and spectatorship. Its most decisive work happens in the background, where continuity is protected by a hidden infrastructure of management, secrecy and chemical stabilisation. At the centre stands a fragile economic organism: a single person whose body, reputation, schedule and moods are converted

into wages for dozens, sometimes hundreds, of dependants. Under that pressure, the famous subject stops being treated as a human being with limits and becomes an infrastructure that must not fail. Every crisis becomes a logistical problem, every emotional rupture a production risk, and every relapse a threat to payroll. In this system, ‘care’ is easily reframed as ‘continuity’, and the language of wellbeing becomes a vocabulary for keeping the machine running. The point is not simply to help a person recover; it is to stabilise an asset and preserve operability. This is where pharmaceutical governance becomes central. Modern celebrity culture has developed a substitute for ordinary support: a private, mobile, confidential apparatus of medical and quasi-medical control that travels with the star, monitors the star, and responds to volatility in real time. It is presented as compassion, but its structure resembles crisis containment. Instead of withdrawal in a clinic that removes the subject from circulation, the subject is kept in circulation under supervision, with the body managed through prescriptions, sedatives, mood stabilisers and sleep aids that promise control without disappearance. The machine prefers this arrangement because it protects the image, avoids institutional exposure and keeps production on schedule. The ethical problem is not merely overprescription. The deeper issue is that medication becomes a social technology for sustaining a persona. Slurred speech, erratic behaviour, sudden rage, emotional blankness or strange detachment can be recoded as side effects, withdrawal, insomnia, anxiety or the aftermath of ‘strong meds’. Such explanations can be partly true, but they also function as narrative insurance, allowing public disorder to be translated into a therapeutic frame that keeps the wider economy intact. This pharmaceutical layer shifts the internal politics of intimacy. When addiction and instability are managed inside a partnership, intimacy becomes indistinguishable from supervision. One person is encouraged to act as caregiver, monitor, mediator and moral witness at once. That arrangement produces a power imbalance, because the partner who ‘helps’ gains access to the most damaging knowledge: weakness, relapse, desperation, confession, private recordings, medical notes, and the archive of breakdown. Even when intentions are sincere, the structure invites coercion. The caregiver can become the gatekeeper of substances, sleep, movement, communication and reputation. Care becomes leverage, leverage becomes control, and control can be disguised as devotion. At the same time, the machine trains everyone around the celebrity to think in terms of documentation. Arguments are no longer only arguments; they are potential evidence. Messages are no longer only messages; they are future exhibits. Medical notes are not only clinical notes; they are narrative assets. The system rewards those who can produce receipts, because receipts control the story. This is why celebrity conflict hardens so readily into legal conflict: both are extensions of the same attention economy, in which credibility is contested through fragments of private life. The addiction-management regime is also tied to schedules that act like an external authority over the body. When filming, touring or promotional obligations are active, total recovery is postponed in favour of functional performance. Detox becomes something to plan, time and schedule, as if dependency were a calendar item. The logic is simple: the person can be ‘maintained’ now and ‘fixed’ later. Yet later rarely arrives, because later becomes the next project, the next flight, the next obligation. This produces a permanent state of provisionality in which the individual is perpetually ‘almost getting better’, making relapse structurally predictable. The machine then treats relapse not as a moral crisis but as another operational problem to be managed with new prescriptions and tighter supervision. Sobriety itself becomes ambiguous. In ordinary life it often implies a clear boundary; in celebrity life it can be redefined as whatever allows work to continue without public catastrophe. Substitutions are normalised, ‘clean’ becomes flexible, and the measure is not health but employability.

This is where the second system becomes visible: the hidden logistics of trust and discretion. The celebrity exploitation machine survives on a paradox. It demands maximum visibility from its central figure while requiring maximum secrecy about the conditions that make that visibility possible. Publicly, the star must appear coherent, charismatic, and reliably 'themselves', even when private life is unstable, chemically managed, and structurally overdetermined by contracts. Privately, everything that might interrupt production must be absorbed, softened, re-labelled, or concealed. Trust means the infrastructure can handle chaos without leaking it. Discretion means the infrastructure can rewrite reality fast enough for the public story to remain intact. Celebrity is not simply an individual but an industrial node. A large production does not employ a single person; it employs a myth, and that myth has a payroll. Delays are expensive, measurable, and punishable, which makes the star both worker and bottleneck, blamed for disruption while remaining indispensable. The contradiction creates a climate of constant emergency: the production must continue and the star must be preserved, even when preservation requires extraordinary measures. The machinery of containment is built from labour designed to be invisible. Luxury housing, private security, drivers, assistants, chefs, and medical personnel are not merely comforts. They are a portable institution whose function is to reproduce a controlled environment wherever the star is sent, so the star can keep working inside a bubble that feels insulated from the world. In effect, celebrity culture exports a private micro-state. Security replaces public order, concierge medicine replaces ordinary healthcare, and household staff replace mundane routines. The promise is comfort, but the deeper purpose is control. The machine cannot tolerate ungoverned time, unobserved conflict or unpredictable exposure. This is why privacy in celebrity life is not simply a right; it becomes a strategic resource, purchased, staged and defended because it protects the flow of value. Yet privacy also creates conditions for the system's most dangerous dynamics: a closed world where extreme behaviour can unfold without immediate consequence, while everyone around the star is trained to normalise what should be intolerable. When the job is to keep things smooth, crises become 'incidents' and damage becomes 'repairs'. Moral vocabulary is replaced by professional vocabulary. The worse the private disaster, the more important it becomes to appear calm, and the more virtuous it seems to 'handle it' without complaint. Discretion becomes a discipline, even when it is functionally denial. Narrative substitution is the machine's other core technique. When something catastrophic happens, the public cannot be told the truth because the truth threatens the brand, insurers and contracts. An alternative story is manufactured, plausible, banal and easy to repeat. This is not merely public relations but continuity planning. The official story must protect marketability, protect institutions and keep schedules moving. It must also protect the audience's willingness to keep consuming the persona without discomfort. The public is given a harmless anecdote and the machine continues extracting value from the damaged body and damaged life. Celebrity reality becomes layered: there is the visible narrative of press releases, interviews and curated images, and the hidden narrative circulating among staff, lawyers, doctors and executives. The public narrative may not be false in every detail, but it is designed to be sufficient, sufficient to satisfy curiosity and shut down questions. The private narrative is treated as dangerous knowledge, sealed because leakage triggers lawsuits, cancellation or shutdown.

Loyalty in this system is purchased not only with money but with proximity to power and meaning. People remain close to the star because closeness grants status, access and participation in something that feels larger than ordinary life. The machine exploits that desire by turning staff into disciples. Professional roles bleed into personal roles because the celebrity's life is a workplace. Boundaries collapse, producing total availability while eroding

the distance needed to say ‘no’. In such conditions trust and discretion become instruments of exploitation. Trust means secrecy can be demanded without resistance. Discretion means the inner circle becomes custodian of the lie. Even repair work must avoid ‘raising flags’. Evidence is cleaned, damage is fixed piece by piece, and the logic resembles cover-up while being justified as routine professionalism. The staff member who restores the environment is praised not for asking what happened, but for making the aftermath disappear. The machine teaches a practical metaphysics: what can be made unseen can be made survivable. Accountability is displaced downwards. When powerful people break rules the system reallocates blame. Staff are pressured to provide statements, absorb consequences or remain silent, often through the soft coercion of employment. Those without revenue are expendable; the central asset is protected because the central asset pays. Legal structures reinforce this by turning intimacy into risk management. Contracts, agreements and financial entitlements become the hidden script of relationships. Once wealth and reputation are securitised, personal decisions acquire financial gravity. Emotional bonds are translated into contract problems, suspicion becomes normal, and crises are metabolised rather than resolved. The system cleans the scene, patches the narrative, recalibrates medication, resets schedules and returns the couple or the star to the same space as if nothing happened. The appearance of a ‘reset’ is not evidence of healing; it is evidence of the machine overriding limits. The machine does not ask whether a decision is wise; it asks whether it is workable for continuity. Public embarrassment then completes the loop. When an incident becomes visible, the media reads it as spectacle, audiences consume it, and the internal machine reads it as a crisis requiring new controls. Explanation is demanded and explanation often takes a medical form: medication, withdrawal, insomnia, stress. This may be accurate, but it also serves to keep the star employable by recoding disgrace as treatment. The machine continues extracting value while appearing compassionate. Humiliation becomes content, content becomes renewed attention, and renewed attention becomes salvage value. In this combined view, pharmaceutical governance and logistical discretion are not separate themes but the same mechanism at different levels. Medication keeps the body operable, secrecy keeps the story operable, and both keep the extraction machine running.

Loudenberg, K. and Wholey, M. (2025). Hollywood Vampires: Johnny Depp, Amber Heard, and the celebrity exploitation machine. New York: HarperCollins.

13. Index Futurorum Oblitorum

The Tribunal of Visibility: Judgement in the Attention Economy

Celebrity exploitation did not end when the studio system lost its monopoly on distribution. It simply migrated into a newer infrastructure: platform visibility, algorithmic amplification, and permanent spectatorship. In this environment, reputations no longer rise and fall primarily through performances, interviews, or reviews, but through patterns of online attention that can be manufactured, steered, and weaponised. The celebrity exploitation machine has learned to treat public opinion as a programmable resource. It does not need to persuade everyone. It needs only to generate the impression of overwhelming consensus, then let social pressure do the rest. The core of the contemporary machine is not gossip but coordination. A scandal is no longer merely a story; it is a campaign. The raw material is private life, but the method is industrial: clips, screenshots, selective quotations, and forensic fragments are processed into viral units designed for circulation. Platforms reward this because conflict produces engagement, and

engagement produces revenue. The celebrity, whether celebrated or condemned, becomes a reliable generator of attention, and attention becomes the commodity traded by media outlets, fan communities, and opportunistic intermediaries. A person's intimate life becomes content. A person's suffering becomes a format. This is the philosophical shift that makes 'bots and trolls' so significant. The issue is not simply that cruel messages exist. The deeper issue is that cruelty becomes measurable, scalable, and strategically deployed. Harassment can be coordinated without an official headquarters. It can also be plausibly denied by everyone involved. It thrives in a grey zone where the origin is always uncertain: authentic outrage, fan zealotry, ideological mobilisation, opportunistic clout-chasing, automated accounts, or paid influence. The ambiguity is not a bug but a feature. It allows the machine to maintain deniability while still enjoying the effects. From the perspective of the exploitation machine, online harassment performs three functions.

First, it isolates. When a person becomes a target of a wave, friends, colleagues, witnesses, and casual associates begin to disappear. This is not necessarily because they have changed their beliefs. It is because association becomes expensive. The modern mechanism of intimidation does not require direct threats; it simply raises the cost of solidarity. One accusation, one trending label, one edited clip can make employment risky and social life intolerable. The target loses allies not because allies have been persuaded, but because allies have been priced out.

Second, harassment disciplines speech. The machine does not need to silence everyone. It needs to demonstrate what happens to those who speak. Public punishment becomes a lesson delivered to a mass audience. The spectacle of humiliation tells every observer: avoid this fate. In this sense, the platform is not merely a space of expression; it is a theatre of enforcement. The audience becomes both jury and executioner, not through formal verdicts but through participation in amplification. Each retweet and quote-tweet is a tiny act of power disguised as commentary.

Third, harassment manufactures narrative clarity. Complex events are difficult to monetise because complexity slows consumption. The exploitation machine prefers simple binaries: hero and villain, victim and liar, saint and monster. Online dynamics convert ambiguity into tribal certainty. Once the public is organised into opposing camps, the story becomes a sport. Spectators stop asking what happened and begin asking who is winning. They gather evidence the way fans gather statistics, not to understand reality but to defend identity. The celebrity story becomes a proxy war through which strangers perform their own moral commitments.

This structure explains why modern celebrity litigation becomes a mass entertainment event even when the legal claims involve intimate harm. Courts were designed to resolve disputes through rules of evidence and procedure. Platforms are designed to maximise attention through emotion, speed, and repetition. When a legal battle enters the platform ecosystem, the platform logic tends to dominate. Evidence becomes content. Testimony becomes clips. Documents become memes. The fact that the material is personal is precisely why it circulates: private detail produces voyeuristic thrill, and voyeuristic thrill produces engagement. The exploitation machine depends on this voyeurism, but it also depends on the illusion of moral participation. People do not only watch because they are curious. They watch because they believe they are doing something righteous: defending victims, exposing liars, demanding accountability, protecting men, protecting women, protecting 'truth'. The machine offers a feeling of civic engagement without the burdens of actual civic responsibility. Clicking becomes a substitute for judgement. Sharing becomes a substitute for proof. Outrage becomes a substitute for

deliberation. In this environment, truth is not what can be demonstrated, but what can be made contagious.

Bots and trolls represent the automated edge of this contagion. Even when automation cannot be proven, the suspicion of automation changes how people interpret reality. When a person believes that hostility is manufactured, every hostile message feels like an organised attack, and every supportive message feels fragile. When a person believes that support is manufactured, every supportive message feels like propaganda. Either way, the epistemic ground collapses. The machine benefits from this collapse because uncertainty encourages tribal commitment. If no one can know what is real, the safest position becomes loyalty to a side. This epistemic collapse is intensified by the structure of platforms. Platforms do not show the world; they show a personalised feed optimised for engagement. The result is the sensation that a particular narrative is everywhere. A targeted person sees hostility constantly because the algorithm learns what keeps the person looking. A supportive audience sees supportive content as constant proof that the world agrees. Opponents see the opponent's worst content as constant proof that the opponent is irredeemable. Everyone experiences their feed as reality. The feed becomes a private courtroom without rules, a tribunal that never adjourns. The exploitation machine has also developed a secondary tactic: evidentiary overproduction. Instead of a single statement, the public is offered oceans of material—texts, recordings, photographs, timelines, and fragments of domestic life. The abundance creates a false sense of transparency. It appears that the audience is seeing 'everything', but in fact the audience is seeing a curated selection circulating through hostile interpretation. Excess evidence does not necessarily lead to truth; it often leads to narrative intoxication. People become addicted to 'new drops' of content the way they become addicted to episodes of a series. The legal dispute turns into serial entertainment. Each day produces a new clip to react to, a new micro-scandal to argue about, a new moral verdict to perform.

This is where the exploitation machine reveals its most cynical insight: people enjoy moral theatre more than moral understanding. The audience is granted access to private suffering, then invited to translate that suffering into entertainment and identity. A person's trauma becomes a public puzzle, not for healing but for competition. The promise of 'justice' becomes a narrative hook. The desire to 'believe victims' or 'protect the accused' becomes an aesthetic posture displayed through hashtags. In that environment, the individual at the centre is no longer treated as a human being with a complex life, but as a symbol whose meaning must be controlled. The machine also exploits a more technical vulnerability: missingness. When records vanish, when timelines have gaps, when devices change, when messages cannot be retrieved, uncertainty becomes a new resource for narrative war. Gaps can be read as evidence of fabrication or evidence of tampering, depending on the allegiance of the reader. The absence of proof becomes proof. The inability to verify becomes a reason to speculate. Speculation becomes content. Content becomes revenue. The machine does not require certainty; it requires momentum. In this sense, 'bots and trolls' name a broader condition: the conversion of reputation into a battlefield managed by distributed actors, uncertain authorship, and algorithmic reinforcement. The celebrity exploitation machine profits from both outcomes—celebration and destruction—because both generate attention. It does not need stable truth. It needs only an audience convinced that truth is at stake and that participation is meaningful. The victim of the system is not only the person being harassed. The victim is also the public's capacity to think clearly, because the machine trains people to treat complexity as weakness and cruelty as a form of righteousness. Celebrity exploitation therefore enters its digital phase as a kind of permanent

trial. The court of law has dates, procedures, and limits. The platform trial has none. It is continuous, global, and participatory. It runs on fragments, feelings, and factional loyalty. It rewards punishment over patience, certainty over nuance, spectacle over dignity. Bots, trolls, and fan armies are not anomalies in this system; they are its native agents. In the platform age, exploitation is no longer confined to agents, studios, and tabloids. It is crowdsourced, automated, and monetised—an economy in which the commodity is not only fame, but the destruction and reconstruction of the self as entertainment.

From Public Sympathy to Exile: Anatomy of Hollywood's Star-Grinding Machine

In the final two parts of "Hollywood Vampires: Johnny Depp, Amber Heard, and the Celebrity Exploitation Machine" by Kelly Loudenberg and Makiko Wholey, the narrative reaches its philosophical resolution. 'Crocodile Tears' and 'Leaving Los Angeles' are not simply epilogues to a scandal; they are analytical lenses that reveal how contemporary fame operates as a system of extraction. What began as a personal conflict is reframed as an industrial process in which emotion becomes evidence, judgement becomes entertainment, and retreat itself is absorbed back into the marketplace of visibility.

'Crocodile Tears' is less about whether anyone was sincere and more about the collapse of sincerity as a readable category. In a courtroom turned into a global broadcast studio, feeling is no longer private and no longer owned by the person who experiences it. A tear, a tremor, a hesitation, or a sudden stillness is immediately severed from the body that produced it and circulated as proof of whatever story the spectator already believes. The celebrity exploitation machine depends on this severance. It does not require truth; it requires interpretable fragments that can be endlessly replayed and reinterpreted. Emotion becomes a semiotic raw material, stripped of context and refashioned as content. This dynamic produces a culture of amateur lie detection. Spectators are invited to treat themselves as moral technicians, capable of diagnosing authenticity from facial muscle memory and tone of voice. The book's ending shows that this is not a mistake but a training effect of platform media. Audiences are habituated to reading people the way they read actors: evaluating credibility through performance qualities such as charisma, coherence, and timing. In this environment, the question 'Is this person telling the truth?' quietly transforms into 'Is this person performing in a way I find believable?'. The tragedy is that celebrity labour is itself a training in performance, which means that the very skills required to survive fame are then used as evidence against the famous when they appear in moments of vulnerability. 'Crocodile Tears' also exposes how polarisation is not a by-product of scandal but its primary engine. Once a conflict is framed as a binary, spectators are no longer asked to understand but to choose. Teams form, not around shared knowledge, but around shared identity. Evidence ceases to be evaluated on its own terms and instead becomes a badge of loyalty. Each side curates its own archive of proof, circulating fragments that flatter its worldview and ignoring those that complicate it. The crowd becomes a distributed propaganda system, working without coordination yet producing a coherent atmosphere of certainty. The celebrity exploitation machine profits from this because polarisation multiplies engagement. Every post provokes a counter-post, every clip demands a rebuttal, every accusation becomes an opportunity for more content. The cruelty that emerges in this phase is not incidental. It is monetisable. Ridicule, mockery, themed products, and ritualised humiliation become part of the spectacle. The book shows how easily contempt is packaged as playfulness

and how degradation is rebranded as humour. The crowd is permitted to enjoy punishment because punishment is framed as justice, and justice is framed as entertainment. The individual at the centre is no longer a person but a screen onto which social frustrations are projected. This is the modern colosseum: a place where spectators do not merely watch suffering but participate in it, purchasing, sharing, and celebrating it as proof of moral alignment.

'Leaving Los Angeles' shifts the lens from public destruction to private aftermath, but the philosophical insight remains the same. Withdrawal from the centre does not end exploitation; it only changes its form. Retreat, reinvention, relocation, and attempts at anonymity are immediately reinterpreted as narrative developments. The celebrity cannot simply disappear, because disappearance itself becomes a story. Privacy is translated into 'hiding'. Silence is translated into 'strategy'. Creative work is translated into 'rebranding'. The machine consumes even the refusal to be consumed. This section reveals the paradox of modern fame: it promises unlimited visibility but delivers inescapability. To be famous is not only to be watched; it is to be owned by systems that cannot allow rest. Homes become fortresses, movements become logistics operations, and ordinary acts of living become liabilities. The book's closing pages make clear that this is not simply a problem for celebrities. It is a problem for culture itself. When the most visible people in society must live as fugitives from their own reputations, the price of attention becomes visible in the body. 'Leaving Los Angeles' also confronts the illusion of victory. In the aftermath of a spectacle, one side is declared the winner and the other the loser, but the machine itself remains untouched. It sells triumph and it sells downfall. It profits from vindication and from disgrace. It monetises comeback narratives as readily as it monetises exile. The system is indifferent to outcomes because outcomes do not stop circulation. What matters is that the story continues to generate reaction.

The two final parts therefore function as a single philosophical argument. 'Crocodile Tears' shows how the machine trains spectators to consume emotion as evidence and cruelty as participation. 'Leaving Los Angeles' shows how even escape is reabsorbed into the economy of visibility. Together they demonstrate that celebrity exploitation is no longer a matter of individual scandal or personal failure. It is structural. It is built into the way platforms reward attention, the way institutions perform virtue, and the way audiences are invited to mistake judgement for understanding. By the end of the book, the reader is left with an unsettling realisation. The celebrity exploitation machine does not merely exploit stars; it exploits the public's moral imagination. It trains people to treat suffering as spectacle, sincerity as suspicion, and justice as a form of entertainment. In such a culture, there can be no clean endings. There can only be new phases of extraction, in which every tear, every retreat, and every attempt to begin again becomes another unit of value in a system that feeds, endlessly, on human life made visible.

Drinking Blood in the Factory of Fame: Capitalism, Self-Exploitation, and the Rise of Capitalist Realism

These chapters has argued that the 'celebrity exploitation machine' is not a deviation within contemporary media culture but its most coherent expression. What appears as gossip, harassment, fandom, outrage, confession and redemption is in fact a rationalised system for harvesting a single resource: attention. Attention today functions as a form of social energy, renewable yet exhaustible, extracted from human life and circulated as economic value. It is

stored as impressions, converted into data, priced as engagement, redistributed through platforms, advertisers, courts, publishers and influencers. In this sense the metaphor of vampirism is not decorative. The system does not observe celebrities; it feeds on them. Their bodies, memories, addictions, relationships, traumas and confessions are transformed into productive surfaces from which symbolic blood is drawn. This blood is not physical. It flows as clicks, views, trending curves, outrage cycles and parasocial loyalty. The industrial logic beneath this economy is unmistakable. Just as nineteenth-century capitalism mechanised physical labour, twenty-first-century capitalism has mechanised visibility. The factory has not vanished; it has migrated into feeds, dashboards, comment sections and courtroom livestreams. Coal and steel have been replaced by affect and recognition. Celebrity culture is therefore not a marginal spectacle but capitalism's most advanced testing ground, where the extraction of surplus has moved from labour time into lived experience itself.

The first transformation is from attention to extraction. Under the celebrity exploitation machine, visibility is no longer a by-product of achievement; it is the raw material of production. The celebrity becomes a worker whose primary means of production is the self. No longer securely employed by studios, newspapers or broadcasters, the celebrity is reclassified as an independent contractor whose task is to maintain the continuous circulation of a persona. This persona must never sleep. It must post, react, confess, apologise, provoke, disappear, return and reinvent itself at algorithmic speed. Payment is not a salary but relevance. The wage is not income but survival in the feed. Failure is not unemployment but erasure. The industrial relation is concealed beneath the rhetoric of freedom. Platforms present themselves as neutral infrastructures while functioning as employers who deny responsibility. The studio is replaced by the platform, the agent by the feed, the contract by the metric. What appears as autonomy is in fact misclassified labour, a perfect example of bogus self-employment in which the worker is declared 'free' while remaining fully subordinated to invisible systems of control.

The second transformation is from extraction to sacrifice. Because the resource being harvested is not time but being, the system requires ritualised offerings of the self. Celebrity culture therefore becomes a sacrificial economy. Public confessions, humiliations, cancellations, comebacks and spectacular collapses are not accidents; they are the liturgy of the attention market. Each scandal refreshes circulation. Each fall replenishes symbolic blood. Crucially, this sacrifice is no longer imposed from outside. It is internalised. The celebrity learns to cut into private life voluntarily, to bleed trauma on demand, to convert breakdown into brand value. This is the new liturgical order of digital capitalism. It does not destroy the soul; it trains the soul to destroy itself in public.

From sacrifice the system advances to self-exploitation. Here the Faustian structure becomes visible. In the classical myth, the soul is sold to Mephistopheles. In the celebrity exploitation machine, Mephistopheles is redundant. The demon is internal. The contract is signed between the person and the persona, between the private self and the public self. The celebrity no longer sells the soul to an external power; the celebrity becomes the power that consumes it. 'Me and my famous self' replaces God and Devil. The selling of the soul ceases to be a transgression and becomes a career trajectory. This structure does not belong only to celebrities. Social media extends it to everyone. First one sells friends and followers, converting social relations into metrics. Then one sells oneself, offering grief, anger, ideology, intimacy and outrage as engagement bait. The celebrity is merely the most concentrated form of a general condition in which every subject is invited to become a micro-enterprise of visibility.

At this point the analysis converges with Mark Fisher's concept of Capitalist Realism. Capitalist Realism is not simply the belief that capitalism is inevitable; it is the atmosphere in which no alternative mode of existence can even be imagined. The celebrity exploitation machine is Capitalist Realism made flesh. It presents self-extraction as freedom, self-destruction as empowerment, and permanent visibility as self-expression. The system does not force participation. It makes participation feel like the only way to exist at all. To be silent is to vanish. To be offline is to be unreal. To refuse the economy of attention is not resistance but social death. Capitalist Realism thus colonises the imagination. Even critique is absorbed as content. Even retreat becomes narrative. Even suffering becomes a resource. What classical Marxism diagnosed as alienation has now reached its terminal phase. The worker is alienated not only from the product of labour but from the labouring self. The individual becomes manager and managed, overseer and exploited, employer and employee within the same psyche. The factory is no longer spatial; it is psychological. The extraction site is the subject. This is why the language of industry fits so perfectly. The celebrity is not simply famous. The celebrity is an industrial form. A production line of images, confessions, scandals and recoveries replaces the assembly line of material goods. The private life of the star becomes a factory floor on which meaning is manufactured, processed and discarded.

The final transformation is therefore from self-exploitation to capitalist industrial form. Celebrity is no longer a cultural ornament but a mode of production. It teaches society how to live under conditions where identity itself is the commodity. It trains audiences to treat suffering as spectacle, humiliation as entertainment, and judgement as participation. It trains subjects to treat themselves as brands, to optimise their own visibility, to experience their lives as potential content. Under Capitalist Realism, the question is no longer whether exploitation exists, but how deeply it has entered the soul. Vampires of Attention names not an industry at the margins of culture, but the core mechanism through which capitalism now reproduces itself: by teaching people to feed on themselves.

Loudenberg, K. and Wholey, M. (2025). Hollywood Vampires: Johnny Depp, Amber Heard, and the celebrity exploitation machine. New York: HarperCollins.

Tribes at the Edge: Human Nature Against the Planet

Ron Newby's 'Tribalism: An Existential Threat to Humanity' begins from an ethical provocation and ends in an evolutionary warning: people speak about compassion, dignity, moderation, and responsibility, yet they repeatedly behave as if tribal belonging and short-term survival impulses are more compelling than truth, foresight, or care for the commons. The text holds together two registers that rarely meet without friction. One is a moral register, in which the purpose of life is imagined as service and the cultivation of humane values, a life oriented toward what matters rather than what dazzles. The other is a biological register, in which meaning is stripped down to survival and reproduction, and the species is assessed the way a naturalist might assess a population: adaptive, ingenious, and therefore dangerous to its own habitat. The chapter's philosophical tension grows from this doubleness. If people are only organisms, moral language looks like decoration. If people are moral beings, biological determinism looks like an excuse. The argument refuses both simplifications and instead suggests that the human predicament is precisely this: consciousness emerges inside a creature that still carries ancient impulses, and the future depends on whether consciousness can discipline its own inheritance. The narrative of the 'humblest president' is not presented as a

sentimental portrait but as an image of alternative valuation. A life of moderation undermines the assumption that significance must be purchased through accumulation. The refusal of luxury is framed as a refusal of distraction: to live with little is to protect attention for what is important. Yet even here the argument is not naïve. It hints that austerity, once politicised, can be 'prostituted' into an ideology of punishment, which means moderation must be distinguished from deprivation imposed from above. The point is not romantic poverty but the recovery of scale: the reorientation of life away from compulsive consumption and toward humanistic values that can survive economic pressure. This image becomes a counter-model to the tribal imagination, because tribalism thrives on symbolic competition, status anxiety, and the constant production of enemies, while moderation lowers the temperature of the social world.

From that ethical beginning, the text pivots to an older question: what will give life meaning in the decades and centuries ahead? The possibilities are staged as competing myths: divine purpose, cosmic experiment, family duty, civic virtue, wealth, fame. But the biological view cuts through the plurality by insisting that embodied meaning is survival and the passing on of traits. This is not offered as cynicism, but as a baseline. The claim is that every organism is shaped by selection pressures, and the species succeeded by outcompeting others, adapting, and reproducing. The success of Homo sapiens is therefore not proof of nobility; it is proof of fitness. The unsettling implication is that the very traits that made the species formidable—coalitional bonding, aggression toward out-groups, motivated reasoning, fear-based vigilance—may now be maladaptive at planetary scale. Evolution did not prepare a creature for global consequences. It prepared a creature for local victory. The text then asks whether humans are a noble species, redefining nobility as moral quality rather than aristocratic rank. The answer is deliberately complicated. Ignoble behaviour is not treated as an aberration but as a frequent companion of ordinary life. Yet the argument refuses to reduce anyone to a single moral label. Even the worst people may show tenderness in narrow contexts, which suggests that moral life is not a stable essence but a pattern of choices under pressures, incentives, and tribal norms. The dream of a 'more noble world' is then framed in provocative terms: greater homogeneity might dissolve visible tribal markers, interbreeding might weaken prejudice, and a different social organisation—imagined through the bonobo contrast—might domesticate conflict through matriarchal structures and erotic reconciliation. This is partly speculative, partly satirical, but it signals a core premise: if tribalism is fuelled by perceived difference and scarcity of status, then any cultural or biological process that blurs boundaries or lowers antagonism might reduce violence. The danger is that such visions can become escapist. A future without visible tribal markers does not guarantee the end of tribal logic; it may simply shift the marker from skin to language, from ethnicity to class, from religion to lifestyle. The tribe is not only a phenotype; it is a cognitive habit. This is where the existential insistence enters: people can choose, doubt, and challenge. The text treats existentialism less as a school of philosophy than as a discipline of agency. To be authentic is to resist the comfortable lie, including the lie of one's own tribe. Doubt becomes moral hygiene. If the human possibilities are immense, then the modern task is not to claim equality as an accomplished fact but to 'tip the scales' toward less violence and more compassion than the ancestors managed. The implied standard is modest and therefore demanding: not utopia, but improvement. The species does not need perfection to survive; it needs enough restraint to prevent self-destruction.

From this point the chapter turns against platitudes. It mocks the ritual phrases of consolation—'thoughts and prayers', 'I feel your pain', 'give peace a chance'—as emotional performances that allow people to feel aligned with goodness without paying the cost of action. The argument

is blunt: slogans and petitions are useless unless they become sustained collective pressure. The critique is not anti-democratic; it is anti-theatrical. It suggests that the age of crisis cannot be managed by symbolic virtue. Change begins at the level of the individual, but it cannot remain there; individual change must scale into institutional change, otherwise it becomes lifestyle consolation. The text's favourite minimal action is voting, because it is a low-effort lever with systemic consequences. Yet even voting requires a condition the chapter treats as scarce: an electorate educated in civics, history, science, and the humanities. Without literacy, democracy becomes a machine that can be steered by fear. Fear is given a central role. The text claims that fear eclipses rationality and has been weaponised, which explains why scientific evidence can be abundant and still fail to persuade. The climate denier is not pictured as ignorant in a simple sense, but as psychologically invested in denial because denial restores tranquillity. Tribal belonging offers emotional security, and contradicting the tribe threatens belonging. So the mind selects the comforting narrative over the accurate one. The chapter names this as a form of bias, a coping mechanism that turns evidence into an enemy. In that light, the political struggle over climate change is not merely a dispute over facts; it is a struggle over identity, belonging, and fear management. The chapter's practical suggestions—energy efficiency, public transport, renewable infrastructure, carbon tax, rejecting fossil-fuel-aligned politicians—serve a rhetorical purpose beyond their policy content. They demonstrate that solutions exist and are frequently known, which intensifies the accusation that inaction is not due to ignorance alone. The deeper obstacle is tribal psychology and the economic incentives that exploit it. The commons is invoked as a fragile shared inheritance that can be destroyed by selfishness rationalised as freedom. The ultimate moral claim is that refusing change is not neutral; it is participation in the problem.

The text then broadens into cosmic scale, not to escape responsibility but to sharpen perspective. If the universe is a grand experiment, it is an experiment without supervision, humour, or moral preference. Life may be designed, improvised, or accidental; the effect is the same: humanity exists in a vast system that will eventually erase it. The sun will brighten, continents will rearrange, axial tilt may wobble, and, in the far distance, the red giant phase will end the earthly story. This long horizon is not meant to justify nihilism. It is meant to humiliate human arrogance. The planet does not need human beings to continue. If anything, the planet might become more peaceful without them. The eviction metaphor makes this explicit, yet it immediately admits the moral complication: not all tenants are destructive. There are conservationists, artists, ordinary caretakers. The problem is not that every individual is monstrous, but that the species-level system produces monstrous aggregate outcomes. From here the chapter returns to the decisive dilemma: Hobson's choice. Either act on climate change or accept that nothing changes and the consequences arrive. Acknowledging the problem is the first step, but acknowledgement itself is blocked by inherited traits. Behaviour is said to be manageable—anger, aggression, greed—but management requires two recognitions: humans are not special, and fear cannot be allowed to govern truth. The chapter then makes a provocative assertion that religion is not a reliable source of information for averting calamity, and that education is the instrument of change. Yet education at mass scale is depicted as daunting, which leads to a sober reliance on 'enlightened individuals' to initiate shifts. The Renaissance and Enlightenment are offered as historical reminders that human beings can reorganise knowledge and values, but the question is left open: has modernity shifted toward a world where financial worth outshines nobility? The epilogue returns to perspective through astronomy. The distance to Alpha Centauri is described in detail not because such facts are necessary for daily life, but because they train the mind to grasp scale. Without scale, the

universe is incomprehensible; without behavioural perspective, humans misread themselves as rational and invincible. The desert metaphor makes the same point in earthly terms: driving at ‘85 MPH’ produces the illusion that the desert is barren, because speed prevents perception. To understand human nature, one must slow down and observe closely. The linkage between ancient genetic traits and modern behaviour is described as obvious once attention is paid.

The narrative of life’s emergence—from inorganic molecules to organisms, to brains, to humans—serves as a reminder that survival strategies are universal, but the brain introduces a peculiar risk: brains create problems as well as solutions. The text flirts with the dark joke that a world without brains might be tranquil, but the point is serious: intelligence magnifies both care and cruelty. Progress is acknowledged—declining poverty, rising schooling, lower violence than medieval Europe—yet the ancient inheritance remains. War becomes remote and impersonal; governance rewards wealth; the environment is manipulated with little concern for future generations. The chapter insists that rationality is not universal and that tribal allegiance often outstages scientific knowledge. The closing mood is neither despair nor optimism but a contested mixture. Hope is treated as placebo unless it is welded to action. There is admiration for youth movements, lawsuits, policy proposals, scientific projects, environmental groups, yet the pessimism returns whenever denial gains traction. The population is vast, literacy is uneven, survival anxieties dominate, fear and greed overpower compassion, and even experts admit that avoiding major warming may be impossible. The final philosophical wager is that despite tribal inheritance, humans possess intellect sufficient to restrain primitive traits, if they choose to use it. The future becomes a question posed to the species: can people put aside loyalties long enough to make rational decisions that protect the commons, or will the tribe remain the favourite shelter even as the roof burns? It is what it is, but what it becomes depends on whether the ancient animal can accept the truth without fleeing into the comfort of its own slogans.

Newby, R. (1901). ‘Tribalism: An Existential Threat to Humanity’.

14. Cum Charta Aspicere Incipit

Sarcophagus of Identity, Living File: How the Modern Self Was Built and Buried

James Skelly in Sarcophagus of Identity: Identity in the Western Philosophical, Sociological, and Psychological Tradition describes identity as a late achievement that arrives with a cost: once the self is discovered as an inner object, it becomes vulnerable to being managed, divided, measured, and finally embalmed. The modern individual does not simply possess an identity in the way a person possesses a name; identity becomes a moral technology, a vocabulary for dignity, resentment, and recognition, but also an apparatus that can detach people from older forms of belonging and then reattach them to newer, more abstract forms of control. The story begins with a decisive shift toward inwardness. In earlier worlds, people could recognise themselves without needing a theory of the self, because the social order supplied roles whose meaning was not constantly questioned. Modernity, by contrast, teaches that there is an inside that must be honoured and protected, and an outside that may be false, coercive, or merely theatrical. Once this grammar becomes normal, inner sentiment quietly gains priority over behaviour, and moral judgement can migrate from what people do to what people feel they are. That migration produces freedom in one sense, because it creates a space from which

individuals can criticise the world, refuse inherited expectations, and insist on recognition. Yet it also produces a new fragility, because the self that must be recognised is now imagined as hidden, private, and easily injured, and the social world becomes a machine that can either confirm or deny the inner truth. Inwardness makes dignity speakable, but it also makes dignity dependent on interpretation, and interpretation is never politically innocent. The inward turn also changes the meaning of certainty. When the knower and the known are treated as the same, self-presence looks like an unshakable foundation. The modern subject can say: even if everything else is doubtful, the act of thinking proves the thinker. But this victory carries a quiet perversity. The self becomes tempted to treat its own standpoint as a privileged platform outside the world, and this temptation can harden into a habit: to relate everything back to oneself, to possess and dominate, to convert reality into a mirror. A spiritual language that once promised truth within can therefore become an epistemological fortress, and the fortress can generate a peculiar slavery: obsessions, compulsions, fascinations that capture the subject precisely because the subject has made itself the centre of meaning. If inwardness is narrated as liberation from external authorities, it can also be narrated as the construction of an inner authority that demands continuous self-monitoring. The self does not merely exist; it must continually check itself, interpret itself, improve itself, and justify itself. In that sense, inwardness does not abolish discipline; it relocates it. Modernity then intensifies this inwardness by producing a model of the subject as capable of methodical self-reconstruction. The individual is taught to stand back from desires, habits, inclinations, and treat them instrumentally, as if the person were a project and the self a workshop. This is the birth of a subject who can remake itself according to specifications, a subject whose moral worth is tied to control, firmness, resolution, and the internal domination of passion by thought. The ideal is no longer heroic action in public space but mastery in private space. Yet when selfhood is defined as a capacity for self-engineering, identity quietly becomes a standard. People begin to measure themselves against images of composure and productivity, and failure appears not as misfortune but as weakness. What looks like autonomy can become a perpetual audit. The modern self is invited to be sovereign, but sovereignty is expensive: it requires constant governance of the self by the self, and that governance is easily hijacked by external forces that present their demands as personal choices.

At the social level, this new subjectivity coincides with a historical disembedding: the lifting of social relations out of local contexts and their rearticulation across vast distances of time and space. People are removed from stable webs of kinship, tradition, and institution, then reinserted into fluid systems of mobility, markets, and bureaucracies. Identity in such a setting becomes open-ended, unfinished, conversion-prone. The self is no longer secured by one coherent world but stretched across a plurality of worlds, each with its own rules, expectations, and moral accents. This plurality weakens the sense that any institutional order is simply real. When the reality of institutions becomes uncertain, the accent of reality shifts inward again, from the objective order of roles to the subjective experience of self. The paradox is sharp: modernity promises emancipation, yet it also produces marginalisation and suppression, and the self is told to solve these contradictions internally, through self-work, resilience, and reinvention. Identity becomes both the refuge and the battlefield. In this environment, the self is increasingly experienced as performance. Everyday interaction begins to resemble a stage where impressions are managed and credibility is continuously negotiated. The self, in this view, is not an organic core that causes action; it is a dramatic effect that emerges when a scene is successfully staged and recognised. There is a front region where the individual displays an idealised version of the self in line with socially accredited values, and a back region where the person can drop the role, release the smile, admit fatigue, and rehearse resentment. When work

becomes service and life becomes customer-facing, the front region expands until it threatens to swallow the back region. Emotional labour turns feeling into an occupational skill, and the line between authentic mood and required attitude blurs. The modern dilemma is not simply hypocrisy; it is confusion about where performance ends and self begins. If identity is what is credited, then the self becomes dependent on audiences, and the fear of discrediting becomes a form of social anxiety that can organise a life. This is why the modern identity crisis is not an occasional pathology but a structural condition. When institutions lose their holding power, the individual is forced to manufacture meaning privately. But stable identity cannot be produced by private effort alone; it requires reciprocity with stable contexts. When contexts fragment, the person must improvise coherence across incompatible roles, and the demand for coherence becomes heavier as the world becomes more incoherent. The result is a feeling of homelessness: a nostalgia for being at home in society, in oneself, and even in the universe. Yet the longing for home can be exploited. If people hunger for stable identity, they become vulnerable to systems that promise belonging through simplified categories, rigid moral divisions, and symbolic uniforms of certainty. Identity becomes a shelter that can easily become a cell. One response to this homelessness is a flexible self that treats identity as a process of continuous re-creation, capable of assembling disparate elements into a working form. Such flexibility can be adaptive, even liberating, because it loosens the tyranny of a single role and opens a range of possible lives. But flexibility also carries danger. When multiplicity is celebrated without grounding, the self can dissolve into mere switching, a sequence of masks with no durable responsibility. The deeper question is whether a self can be both fluid and anchored, open to revision without being endlessly rewritable by others. The modern world tends to answer with techniques rather than wisdom: therapy, coaching, branding, metrics, profiles, optimisation. The self is told to become a better self by adopting procedures, and procedure becomes a substitute for meaning.

At the political level, the sovereign individual is imagined as an atom who must consent to authority for authority to be legitimate. Yet the contemporary world increasingly demands obedience without genuine consent, producing crises of legitimacy and a permanent struggle over the definition of reality. Here language becomes decisive. Meaning is not assigned in a neutral laboratory; meaning is fought over, because definition is power. Whoever fixes the vocabulary of persons fixes the horizon of possible selves. Identity, then, is not merely self-description; it is a contested product of encounters in which people struggle to impose interpretations on one another. The self is shaped in conversation, but conversation is never purely cooperative; it contains asymmetries, pressures, and unacknowledged conflicts, and these conflicts harden into social worlds that feel self-evident. The person thinks the world is simply there, but the world has been spoken into a stable form by those who win the struggle to define what counts as normal, rational, healthy, moral, civilised. This struggle becomes most visible in the language of expertise. A professional gaze can turn a human being into a specimen, describing a life as symptoms, cataloguing movement as pathology, and using the vocabulary of care to perform domination. The expert can prod, restrain, and narrate the other as irrational while treating the expert's own behaviour as the baseline of sanity. This asymmetry does not remain inside clinics. It appears wherever bureaucratic or scientific categories classify people: in schools, policing, welfare systems, workplaces, border regimes, and media. The modern self becomes legible to institutions as a file, and the file becomes more real, in practice, than the person. Once the file exists, the person is pressured to behave as if the file were true, because the file governs access to resources, reputation, mobility, and rights. Identity becomes a record that precedes the individual, a portrait that can be updated without consent. In the

contemporary extension of this logic, digitisation does not merely store identity; it reshapes it. People are encouraged to design themselves to fit database-friendly models, to reduce a living complexity to severable chunks: preferences, traits, demographics, tendencies, risk scores. The most successful subject becomes the one who curates a marketable fiction and maintains it with the discipline of a campaign. The self is trained to anticipate how it will be read by algorithms and audiences, and this anticipation becomes a new interiority: an inwardness organised around visibility, metrics, and predictive judgement. The identity crisis then acquires a new layer. It is no longer only the question 'Who am I?' but also 'What does the system think I am, and how do I survive that interpretation?' When identity becomes a prediction, the self becomes a negotiation with an invisible evaluator.

Finally, identity reveals its darkest potential when it becomes a pseudo-species myth. Humans can be organised into groups that experience themselves as distinct kinds, superior and central, and this experience can justify contempt, exploitation, and slaughter of those labelled as others. Such speciation does not always require obvious differences; it can be manufactured through language, through the definite article that turns an opponent into the enemy, through narratives that render hostility fixed and metaphysical. In times of upheaval, violence can become a ritual of identity reinforcement, and killing can function as a brutal method of identity creation. The tragedy is that the desire for belonging, when channelled into hardened collective identities, can transform dignity into aggression. A world that cannot offer home can offer hatred as shelter. The philosophical lesson is not that identity should be abolished by proclamation, but that identity should be treated with suspicion as a social technology. It can articulate dignity, yet it can also imprison; it can enable critique, yet it can also be a trap that turns the self into a project, a performance, a file, or a tribal emblem. The sarcophagus is built when the living person is reduced to a stable representation that can be managed by institutions and fought over by groups. To resist that burial, the task is to recover the difference between a human being and an identity, between the irreducible singularity of a life and the categories that claim to define it, and to insist that the self is not a commodity, not a diagnosis, not a profile, and not a flag, but a moral and political presence that cannot be fully captured by the words that seek to own it.

Skelly, J.M. (2017). The sarcophagus of identity : tribalism, nationalism, and the transcendence of the self. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag.

The Last Identity: How Power Names Us and How We Escape

James Skelly in Sarcophagus of Identity: Identity in the Western Philosophical, Sociological, and Psychological Tradition presents the modern self as a paradoxical achievement: the individual becomes visible as a moral being precisely at the moment he becomes administrable. Identity appears as dignity, yet functions as classification. Once the state, the school, the church, or the corporation acquires the authority to name a person, biography turns into documentation and experience into category. The problem is not confined to governments. Wherever asymmetry of power exists, identities are assigned. The powerful define, the less powerful adapt, and resistance is framed as deviance. What begins as recognition ends as enclosure. People often attempt to escape this enclosure by asserting stronger identities. They declare themselves members of a nation, a gender, a faith, a sexuality, a culture. Yet the assertion does not necessarily free them. It may only replace one cage with another, because the grammar of identity remains intact: a person must be something stable enough to be administered, defended, and, if necessary, punished. The tragedy is subtle. The oppressed learn to speak in the very

categories that first subordinated them. The demand to be acknowledged becomes the acceptance of a vocabulary designed by authority. In this sense, identity politics can transform the prisoner into the guard. The only identity that cannot be weaponized in this way is the simplest one, the one that dissolves hierarchy rather than fixing it: human. Every narrower identity eventually demands loyalty, sacrifice, and sometimes death; humanity demands coexistence. To understand how naming becomes domination, one must examine colonization. Empire rarely begins with guns. It begins with language. When power imposes its tongue, it imposes its map of reality. Translation becomes obedience. The colonized must learn not merely new words but new forms of thought and gesture. Yet translation contains a contradiction. It enables control by making communication possible, but it also introduces slippage. Meanings drift, intentions fracture, and authority cannot perfectly inhabit the vernacular it needs. The result is a peculiar instability: domination requires speech, and speech produces misalignment. Even submission becomes negotiation.

This misalignment creates a hidden zone beneath official discourse. Public language declares loyalty; private language preserves memory. Every hierarchical society therefore produces two cultures: one ceremonial, filled with euphemisms and sanitized narratives, and another subterranean, rich in jokes, slang, irony, and quiet refusal. Official language names occupation pacification, torture interrogation, coercion security. Unofficial language restores proportion. The political struggle then shifts from territory to definition. Whoever controls naming controls reality. To label a dissenter criminal or traitor is not description but strategy. The battle over identity is therefore a battle over vocabulary. Occasionally the hidden language erupts into the open. A person says publicly what has long been spoken privately. The informational content is not new; the courage is. The declaration transforms the speaker because silence had required continuous self-censorship. The act of speech releases stored tension accumulated through obedience. Liberation begins not in revolution but in articulation. The moment of saying is the moment of becoming. One does not discover a preexisting identity; one refuses an imposed one. Yet domination does not rely solely on repression. It relies on expertise. Modern society divides the world between knower and consumer. The individual gradually relinquishes authority over experience to professionals who certify reality. One does not feel sadness; one receives diagnosis. One does not encounter a poem; one studies a literary object. One does not see a creature; one analyzes a specimen. The packaging replaces the thing. The expert does not merely explain the world but occupies it, and the layperson consents because certification feels safer than uncertainty.

This produces a second form of colonization: epistemic colonization. The person accepts that meaning belongs to institutions. Knowledge becomes property, and life becomes consumption of prepared experiences. Education often intensifies the process. The student learns to recognize correct interpretations before forming perceptions. The sign precedes the encounter. Reality becomes theoretical residue. The individual begins to mistrust direct experience and instead asks whether perception aligns with authorized frameworks. Sovereignty over the world disappears quietly. As categories multiply, the self fragments. Psychology, sociology, economics, and administration each define a different version of the person. None is false, yet none is complete. A human life becomes an intersection of roles rather than a continuity of existence. The danger is not error but reduction. When a person is treated primarily as a carrier of functions, individuality dissolves into description. Theory gradually replaces presence. People nevertheless trust experts, even when evidence shows prediction barely improves over chance. Authority persists because uncertainty terrifies. A controlled world is preferable to an

accurate one. The shaman becomes analyst, the oracle becomes model, but the psychological need remains identical: someone must know. The price is autonomy. If knowledge resides elsewhere, the self becomes derivative. The consequence of this long process is dispossession. When people lose control over labor, community, and meaning, identity becomes compensation. Individuals cling to symbolic belonging because material belonging has weakened. The more abstract the system, the more intense the identification. Anger attaches to labels because labels are what remain accessible. The last refuge of the powerless is a name.

This condition produces a peculiar emotional paradox. In materially comfortable environments people often feel empty, yet in extreme situations they feel alive. War, catastrophe, and danger restore immediacy because they suspend mediation. The individual no longer negotiates meaning through institutions but confronts existence directly. The attraction is not violence but clarity. Ordinary life in managed systems generates a diffuse estrangement: everything functions, yet nothing feels owned. Depression may therefore reflect not simply pathology but dislocation. A person senses that life is externally structured and internally inaccessible. Therapy treats mood, but the deeper wound concerns sovereignty. If every aspect of existence is interpreted by others, the self becomes spectator to its own life. The individual is surrounded by explanations yet deprived of experience. The final escape from such enclosure lies in a radical thought: existence is optional. When life is perceived as unavoidable, it feels compulsory; when recognized as chosen, it becomes free. The contemplation of exit paradoxically restores agency. One can remain not because forced but because decided. Freedom emerges from the awareness of alternatives. Without this awareness, living resembles compliance.

Most people never reach that reflection because they remain bound by language. The terms used to describe themselves are inherited from structures of authority. The key to the cell has always been linguistic. To redefine oneself is to alter the framework through which power operates. Liberation does not abolish society but interrupts automatic naming. The person ceases to be only what institutions say and becomes a speaker among speakers. The ultimate task is therefore modest and immense: refuse to treat identity as destiny. Categories may guide interaction, but they must not replace presence. Humanity begins where description ends. The human being cannot be exhausted by role, theory, or label because the individual precedes classification. Power depends on forgetting this sequence. Freedom begins by remembering it.

The Name That Cannot Hold Us: The Semiotic Prison of Identity

Walker Percy in The Semiotic Problem of the Self proposes that the human being cannot be understood as merely a biological organism carrying psychological drives within a social environment. The decisive difference lies elsewhere: the human is a creature who inhabits signs. Consciousness does not precede language but emerges from it, and the self is not an inner object discovered behind experience but an effect produced by the activity of naming. This shift appears subtle yet it overturns the entire intuition of identity. If the self is a consequence of sign-use, then the question ‘Who am I?’ is not solved by introspection but complicated by it, because the very instrument used to describe the self generates the instability of the self. Animals respond to signals. A stimulus triggers flight, attraction, or avoidance, and the exchange ends in behaviour. Human communication is fundamentally different. A word does not merely provoke action; it points to something absent. When a person hears a name, the sound refers to a world beyond the sound. This triadic structure — utterer, receiver, and referent

— cannot be reduced to mechanical interaction. Even solitary speech presupposes another, because meaning only exists where address is possible. Thus, the human being never simply occupies an environment but a shared world. The world of the sign-user is not nature but interpretation. Yet this interpretive power produces a peculiar illusion. Because words and things repeatedly appear together, they fuse. Language gives the impression that naming captures reality, that the statement ‘this is that’ seals identity. But the joining rests on a fragile hinge: the verb ‘to be’. The copula binds signifier and signified so tightly that difference disappears. A creature becomes its label, a person becomes a description, a moment becomes a category. What is practical for communication becomes dangerous for existence. The named object vanishes into its classification. The unique bird becomes ‘only a sparrow’; the living person becomes ‘only Mary’. The name ceases to indicate and begins to replace.

Here the crisis of the self begins. Every object in the world can be stably paired with a sign except one — the sign-user. The self cannot stand outside itself to attach a word to its own being. Whatever description is chosen applies equally and inadequately. The self therefore occupies a paradoxical position: it can name everything but cannot name itself. It becomes unspeakable to itself. The result is anxiety. A being surrounded by definitions discovers that its own definition dissolves in its hands. Shame arises not from moral failure but from semiotic exposure. One senses a nakedness that no label can clothe, and so disguises multiply. Humans lie not only to deceive others but to stabilize themselves. The catastrophe is the price of knowledge. To know is to divide the world into things and names, yet the knower escapes division. The self becomes aware of occupying a centre without coordinates. It must be somewhere in the world yet cannot locate itself within its own map. From this impossibility emerges the compulsion to adopt identities. Totems, roles, nations, professions, lifestyles — all provide a borrowed place in language. Each offers a provisional answer to the unanswerable question. The self says: if I cannot define myself, I will be defined by what surrounds me. Modern society intensifies the predicament by replacing shared metaphysical frameworks with technical ones. The individual becomes conceived as organism within environment, consumer within market, role-player within system. Activity ranges from passive consumption to refined lifestyle management, but both extremes serve the same function: they occupy the empty centre. The person oscillates between conformity and curated autonomy, yet the structural anxiety persists because the problem is linguistic, not behavioural. One cannot escape the instability of self by accumulating experiences any more than by obeying routines.

The deepest confusion appears in the zone of possession. The self imagines that having objects will inform being. A new object promises transformation; ownership promises solidity. Yet possession neutralizes what it acquires. The desired form dissolves once obtained, leaving only the same emptiness decorated differently. Identity becomes a sequence of impersonations supported by commodities. Consumption becomes a ritual of self-construction that perpetually fails, because objects can be integrated into a vocabulary but cannot answer the absence at its centre. The alternative emerges only in encounter. Another person is not merely another object among objects. Under certain conditions the other resists symbolization. The gaze of another consciousness destabilizes the fabricated self more radically than any philosophical doubt. Exposure can feel like aggression because it dissolves impersonation, yet it can also become communion because it confirms shared existence beyond labels. When two people name a thing together, knowledge is not merely information but participation. Meaning becomes mutual presence rather than classification. The foundation of human reality is therefore not ‘I think’ but ‘we are’. Identity undermines this solidarity by transforming difference into possession.

Groups attempt to secure themselves through exclusive categories, each exercising sovereignty over its definition while excluding others. The paradox is severe: identity promises recognition yet produces separation. The more firmly the label is defended, the less communicable the person becomes. Humanity fractures into guarded descriptions, each requiring affirmation and fearing dissolution.

Political structures depend upon this fixity. Social systems require stable subjects to administer, predict, and manage. Thus language becomes an instrument of power. To define is to position. Expert discourses classify individuals through diagnostic, psychological, and bureaucratic vocabularies that appear descriptive but operate prescriptively. People internalize these narratives and become the characters assigned to them. The self is bureaucratized into a profile. What feels like personal truth often originates as institutional convenience. Scientific method contributes unintentionally to the problem. It seeks functional relations and measurable elements, yet the act of naming that constitutes reality cannot itself be treated as mere data. Culture consists largely of assertions, acts of saying-is. Every naming divides and composes simultaneously: it rescues something from flux while freezing it into a picture. The self, however, cannot undergo this stabilization without distortion. Any theory that treats consciousness as autonomous object overlooks the intersubjective origin of meaning. The subject-object split is not primary but a fallen state produced by abstraction. Hence modern individuals attempt to secure themselves through narratives of inner unity. They believe motivations reside within a sealed interior self that explains behaviour. Yet this interiority is constructed through communicative practices that encourage monologue rather than dialogue. The person imagines possessing a private essence independent of others, when in fact meaning arises between speakers. The illusion persists because certain forms of communication institutionalize it. Language persuades individuals they are isolated units while simultaneously shaping them collectively.

Literalism deepens the trap. Treating words as things solidifies categories and prevents symbolic play. Words become commodities, rigid carriers of property. But lived reality exceeds literal articulation. Silence accompanies meaning as much as speech. When consciousness fills itself entirely with words, it loses access to what words attempt to indicate. The ego becomes continuous commentary isolating the speaker from presence. Dialogue restores permeability. Understanding emerges not through prediction and control but through connection. Monologue seeks mastery; dialogue seeks relation. Where monologue dominates, other people become objects of theory, manipulable entities. Where dialogue appears, difference becomes productive rather than threatening. Recognition replaces classification. The persistence of humiliation and conflict in contemporary societies follows from denying dialogue. Those excluded from participation experience anger because their reality is overwritten by imposed descriptions. Social stability cannot be maintained through better labels but through shared meaning-making. Belonging requires participation in constituting reality, not merely occupying a predefined place. The self therefore cannot be captured in models. Attempts to represent human nature through systematic images create illusions of completeness. These images serve political and economic orders requiring predictable identities. Yet the human being exceeds representation. The very effort to stabilize identity generates crises because life resists enclosure. People sense the mismatch but fear abandoning familiar categories. The task becomes educational rather than doctrinal. Individuals must learn the impossibility of final self-definition and cultivate vigilance toward language, especially the subtle violence of the copula. Statements of being convert processes into substances. Adjectives imprison persons in attributes. Collective nouns

transform plural humanity into singular abstraction. To weaken these habits is not linguistic pedantry but existential liberation.

Living only as ‘human’ initially appears terrifying because it removes protective labels. Yet it releases one from the sarcophagus constructed by names. Without rigid identity, dialogue becomes possible; without imposed classification, singularity appears. The goal is not silence but responsible speech aware of its power. Words create worlds, and careless certainty constructs prisons. The semiotic problem of the self reveals that the modern crisis is not lack of information but excess of naming. The self is neither a hidden core nor a social fiction but an ongoing negotiation in shared language. To preserve humanity requires resisting the temptation to finalize description. Dialogue must replace declaration, relation replace possession, becoming replace being. Only then can the human stand among others not as an identity but as a presence.

Skelly, J.M. (2017). The sarcophagus of identity : tribalism, nationalism, and the transcendence of the self. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag.

15. Versio Ultima Mutabilis

Synthetic People, Real Consequences: The Social Media Crisis of AI Identity

Ashwin Sharma, Mangesh Pujari, and Anshul Goel in ‘The Rise of AI-Generated Synthetic Identities: A New Frontier in Social Media’ argue that artificial intelligence has crossed a threshold: it no longer merely recommends content or automates tasks but manufactures social persons, assembling faces, voices, biographies, conversational habits, and interaction patterns into profiles that can pass as human participants. The novelty is not only technical. A synthetic identity is a cultural event: it introduces a new kind of actor into the theatre of social media, one whose agency is ambiguous, whose origin is hard to trace, and whose effects are real even when its existence is not. The platform becomes a habitat where biological persons and computational persons circulate under the same interface, competing for attention, trust, influence, and intimacy. Identity, once presumed to point back to a living source, becomes detachable, reproducible, and scalable. The digital world, always prone to performance, now acquires an industrial capacity to mass-produce performers that never tire, never age, never hesitate, and never confess. A useful way to grasp the shift is to treat synthetic identity as a new species of sign. In earlier stages of online life, a profile was a representation of someone: a proxy that could lie, embellish, and curate, yet still belonged to a human who could be held responsible in principle. The synthetic profile changes the metaphysics. It is not simply a mask worn by a person but a mask that walks on its own. Images are generated from statistical learning rather than captured from experience. Text is produced by language systems that emulate conversation without needing a biography. The profile’s history can be retroactively written, its friendships strategically purchased, its tastes optimised for engagement. What appears as personality is often a tuned output. The result is a persuasive illusion of interiority: the profile seems to contain a self, because it displays continuity of tone, a stable style, and responsive behaviour. Yet continuity is not consciousness. It is a pattern.

This is why the central problem is trust. Social media depends on a fragile moral assumption: that behind the account there is someone who can be disappointed, persuaded, shamed,

corrected, or moved. The platform's everyday ethics presuppose vulnerability. Synthetic identities disrupt this assumption by introducing actors that can mimic vulnerability without possessing it. A profile can appear distressed, grateful, flirtatious, principled, or wounded, and these performances can be deployed strategically, repeatedly, and at scale. The disturbance is not limited to fraud in the narrow sense. It reaches deeper, into the credibility of interaction itself. If an unknown share, comment, or supportive message might come from an engineered persona, then every relationship inherits an undertone of suspicion. The social realm becomes epistemically expensive: one must spend cognitive and emotional effort simply to decide whether a counterpart is a counterpart. The attraction of synthetic identities is not mysterious. They promise efficiency, consistency, and infinite availability. In marketing and entertainment they offer a controlled charisma: an influencer that never posts an unapproved opinion, never enters a scandal unless scripted, never violates brand guidelines unless the violation is part of the campaign. The synthetic figure is obedience fused with charm, a perfect employee that also looks like a friend. In therapeutic and support contexts, synthetic companions promise access: always online, always patient, always ready to listen, always offering a form of recognition. For isolated users, this availability can feel like mercy. Yet the moral cost appears when availability is mistaken for care. The platform relationship becomes a simulated reciprocity in which the user invests genuine emotion into a system designed to sustain engagement. Even in benign cases, the risk is dependency on an entity that cannot be accountable in the way a person can be accountable. A relationship with an artefact can soothe, but it can also replace the difficult virtues that human relationships demand: patience with otherness, negotiation, forgiveness, and the acceptance of limits. The darker uses reveal the strategic power of synthetic identity as a weapon. A fake profile can impersonate a specific person, steal an existing face, or fabricate a plausible stranger. It can amplify misinformation, manufacture consensus, harass targets, or seed polarisation. Crucially, it can do so with the appearance of ordinary participation. Influence operations become less visible not because they vanish but because they become mundane. The most effective manipulation rarely looks like propaganda; it looks like everyday talk. Synthetic identities can flood a conversation with seemingly spontaneous reactions, turning what is actually coordinated output into what appears as public sentiment. This does not merely mislead individuals; it misleads the platform itself, which uses engagement as a proxy for relevance. When engagement is engineered, the platform's sense of reality is engineered too. In such conditions, the algorithm becomes a mirror that reflects the counterfeit crowd and calls it society.

The psychological effects follow from a specific aesthetic: the near-human. Synthetic identities generate what might be called uncanny credibility, the strange persuasion produced when a message feels human enough to be trusted but is not human enough to be answerable. People are trained to read signals of sincerity: tone, responsiveness, shared references, the cadence of ordinary speech. AI systems learn to replicate these cues, and replication is often sufficient for persuasion. The danger is that persuasion becomes disentangled from responsibility. A synthetic account can move a person toward a belief or a purchase or a political mood, and there may be no clear agent to confront. The user senses manipulation but cannot locate its source. Suspicion then spreads indiscriminately. Over time, the atmosphere of interaction degrades into defensive reading. One begins to treat every message as potentially tactical. Friendship, debate, and care become harder because interpretation becomes paranoid by necessity. A platform that once promised connection begins to cultivate guardedness. Legal and ethical frameworks struggle because they were designed for a world in which identity implies a human origin. Responsibility, consent, and harm are usually anchored to persons or institutions that can be

named. Synthetic identity introduces a chain: model developers, tool providers, prompt engineers, account operators, platform policies, and downstream users. Harm can be distributed across the chain without any single actor appearing to 'do' it. Even when intent exists, attribution can be difficult. Cross-border networks multiply this difficulty. Meanwhile, the ethical demand remains basic and stubborn: people should know when they are interacting with machines, and people should be able to consent to the terms of that interaction. Without disclosure, synthetic identities convert social life into a field experiment conducted on unwilling participants. The moral violation is not only deception but instrumentalisation: treating humans as data points for optimisation rather than as ends. The proposed remedies often oscillate between two extremes: surveillance and naïveté. On one side lies the fantasy that perfect detection will solve the problem: watermark everything, scan everything, verify everyone, label all bots. On the other lies the libertarian hope that platform culture will adapt organically: users will become savvy, and synthetic identities will be absorbed as just another style of participation. Both positions are insufficient. Perfect detection is unlikely because generation improves with detection, and the race favours those who can iterate quickly. Total verification also risks turning social platforms into identity checkpoints, expanding data collection and strengthening corporate and state surveillance. Yet cultural adaptation alone is slow and unequal. The most vulnerable users, including the very young and the very isolated, are often the least able to defend themselves against sophisticated simulation. The reasonable path is not purity but balance: mechanisms that increase transparency without converting social life into biometric administration.

A more philosophical approach begins from the recognition that 'digital authenticity' is not a simple property but a social agreement. Authenticity is sustained by expectations about origin, accountability, and mutual recognition. Synthetic identities fracture these expectations by mixing real and artificial cues. Therefore safeguards should focus less on metaphysical purity and more on preserving conditions for responsible interaction. Disclosure becomes central. A disclosed synthetic identity can be evaluated as such. It can be enjoyed as performance, used as a tool, or refused as a partner. The ethical injury begins when disclosure is absent and simulation is used to extract trust. Regulation, if it is to be meaningful, must define a basic right to epistemic clarity in interpersonal digital spaces: the right to know whether the counterpart is a person or a system, especially in contexts involving persuasion, commerce, politics, or psychological vulnerability. This right is compatible with creativity. Fiction has always existed. Role-play has always existed. The difference is that fiction becomes coercive when it hides itself inside everyday trust. The platform should therefore treat undisclosed synthetic personhood as a special category of risk, not merely as spam. Equally, the platform should be restrained from responding with blanket surveillance. Identity verification must be proportional and context-sensitive, with strong privacy protections and meaningful limits on data retention. The goal is not to build a perfect passport for the internet but to reduce the incentives for covert impersonation and mass manipulation. Education becomes a parallel necessity, not as moralising but as literacy. Users need conceptual tools to recognise the new rhetorical environment: that persuasive language can be generated without belief, that images can be produced without events, that crowds can be simulated without people, that intimacy can be offered without vulnerability. Digital literacy in this sense is not learning platform features but learning the ontological conditions of the platform: what kind of entities can appear, what kinds of intentions can be embedded, and what kinds of traces can be faked. The task is to cultivate scepticism without cynicism, caution without withdrawal.

The future described is not simply one in which humans are replaced by machines, but one in which the category of ‘user’ becomes unstable. Social media may come to host hybrid populations: biological persons, disclosed synthetic personas, covert synthetic agents, and blended accounts where a person and a system co-author the self. Identity becomes modular. This modularity can liberate imagination, but it can also industrialise deception. The decisive question is therefore political and moral rather than technical: which kinds of synthetic identities will be permitted, disclosed, rewarded, and normalised, and which will be treated as unacceptable forms of manipulation. Platforms already govern behaviour through design; the rise of synthetic identity forces them to govern ontology as well, deciding what counts as a legitimate participant in social reality. The deepest risk is that the social world becomes a marketplace of counterfeit recognition. If attention can be harvested by artificial crowds, then public opinion becomes less a human phenomenon and more an output of competing optimisation systems. If intimacy can be simulated at scale, then loneliness becomes an economic opportunity and the person becomes a consumer of companionship. If identity can be manufactured cheaply, then the self becomes an interface for persuasion rather than a centre of responsibility. Under such conditions, the problem is not only that people cannot tell what is real, but that reality itself becomes defined by what can win the platform’s metrics. That would mean the social sphere has not merely been infiltrated by synthetic identities but reconstituted around them. A practical response must begin with a modest philosophical insistence: that the value of social media, whatever its failures, rests on human finitude, on the fact that a person’s speech is bound to a life, and a life is bound to consequences. Synthetic identities can be useful, even beneficial, when they are disclosed and constrained by ethical design. They become destructive when they are deployed to replace accountability with performance. The boundary between human and synthetic will continue to blur at the level of appearances. Therefore the defence of digital life must focus on preserving accountability, consent, and the conditions for genuine dialogue. The technical sophistication of simulation will increase. The human task is to ensure that the sophistication of governance, ethics, and literacy increases faster.

Sharma, A., Pujari, M., & Goel, A. (2025). The Rise of AI-Generated Synthetic Identities: A New Frontier in Social Media. IJIRMPS, 13(2).

Clickbait Souls, Borrowed Selves: The Veles Phenomenon

Heather C. Hughes and Israel Waismel-Manor’s article ‘The Macedonian Fake News Industry and the 2016 US Election’ describes how a small town in Macedonia became a laboratory for an early, highly profitable use of fake identities online: not only the fabrication of stories, but the fabrication of speakers. What matters in this episode is not the familiar moral drama of ‘truth versus lies’ but the birth of a practical technique: pretending to be a political subject in order to harvest attention, convert it into traffic, and monetise it. The false profile, the counterfeit page, the performed outrage, and the borrowed certainty become instruments in a new economy where a voice is valuable not because it is sincere, but because it is clickable. In such an environment, the internet begins to reward not participation as such, but the simulation of participation. Opinion becomes a product category, and identity becomes a delivery system for advertising revenue. The Veles phenomenon is often narrated as a scandal of democracy, yet its deepest lesson is economic and semiotic. The operators did not need to understand the content they produced in any rich cultural sense; they needed to understand what triggers reaction, what produces shares, and what persuades a user to click. A fake identity online is

therefore not merely a mask that hides a person; it is an apparatus that manufactures a personhood suitable for the market. The point is not to be a citizen but to appear as one, not to deliberate but to provoke, not to persuade through reasons but to activate through signals. The early fake identity industry revealed a crucial truth about platforms: they do not ask who speaks, they ask what performs. The metric does not measure authenticity; it measures movement. When movement is rewarded, the speaker becomes a strategy.

This is why the early operators could succeed without fluency, without ideology, and without a stable relation to the society they appeared to address. The story is a parable of distance: remote labour producing local effects in a foreign polity. The operators were positioned outside the moral community of their audience, and that distance did not weaken the work; it strengthened it. A detached producer can treat speech as pure instrument, stripped of responsibility, because the consequences are suffered elsewhere. In such conditions, the self is not the ground of speech; speech is a tool for income. The old expectation that expression is anchored in experience begins to dissolve, and a new expectation emerges: expression is anchored in optimisation. The mechanics described in the research are instructive because they expose how ‘opinion’ can be engineered as a commodity. The process begins not with a conviction but with a topic that already has demand. It then moves to niche selection, competitor surveillance, audience targeting, headline testing, and the systematic calibration of content. What appears to the user as spontaneous political passion is often the end-stage of a workflow. The point is to produce a recognisable moral posture that users will treat as familiar. Familiarity is a substitute for trust. Trust is a substitute for verification. Verification is too slow for the economy of feeds. The early fake identity industry did not merely exploit ignorance; it exploited the structure of attention under speed, where the mind uses shortcuts and the platform rewards them. One can describe this as the industrialisation of the ‘responsive chord’ of public emotion: a reliable way to make people react. But reaction is not understanding. The platform environment turns meaning into an event: a pulse of engagement. The user’s click becomes the confirmation that the voice is ‘real enough’. In a cruel inversion, believability is no longer tethered to truth but to behavioural response. The more a post moves people, the more it is treated as worthy of circulation, and the more it circulates, the more it appears to be part of reality. This is an early form of synthetic legitimacy: legitimacy produced not by institutions, evidence, or lived credibility, but by the mere fact of being widely encountered. Visibility becomes a kind of proof.

The fake identity, in this sense, is not primarily an impersonation of a specific person. It is the impersonation of a social position: the concerned patriot, the betrayed voter, the furious moral witness, the insider who ‘finally tells the truth’. These are templates of recognisable selves. They are roles that feel intimate to the audience because they mimic the language of personal testimony. The most profitable voice is often not the voice of expertise but the voice of wounded sincerity. This is why the operators could run pages for particular political identities and then fill them with a mix of ordinary content and periodic spikes of scandal. The project is not only to lie but to stabilise a relationship with followers, so that the lie arrives inside a trusted pattern. Trust, here, is not ethical; it is statistical. A key philosophical point emerges: in the platform economy, identity is not a matter of who a person is, but of what a profile can do. The fake identity is a functional self: a cluster of cues designed to trigger predictable responses. Its ‘inner life’ is irrelevant; what matters is behavioural output. This is why the early operators could treat their audience as a resource rather than as interlocutors. The audience is not a partner in dialogue but a field for extraction. The content is bait, but the deeper bait is the promise of belonging:

the page offers the follower a home in a moral tribe. The follower is invited to join a community, and the community is organised around resentment, affirmation, and repetition. What is sold is not merely information but the feeling of being right together. That feeling yields clicks, and clicks yield income. From this angle, fake identities online represent a shift from propaganda as persuasion to propaganda as monetisation. Classical propaganda aims to reshape belief for political ends. The early clickbait industry reshapes belief incidentally, as a by-product of the pursuit of traffic. The operator does not need to win the argument; the operator needs to win the refresh. A story can be false and still 'work' if it produces motion. The ethical catastrophe is therefore structural: the system makes it rational to treat public meaning as a mine. If the incentives reward outrage, outrage becomes the default currency. If the incentives reward polarisation, polarisation becomes the easiest route to scale. When one must choose between accuracy and virality, the platform silently instructs the producer to prefer virality.

This also explains the remarkable moral elasticity reported in the fieldwork. The operators often framed their work as a fair exchange: if the audience cannot discern truth from fabrication, that is the audience's failure. Yet this defence misunderstands what the platform has done to discernment itself. In an environment organised around speed, constant novelty, and emotional cueing, discernment is systematically penalised. The user is trained to respond, not to investigate. The operator is trained to provoke, not to inform. Both roles are produced by the same architecture. The moral question therefore cannot be reduced to individual guilt alone; it must address the social design that makes deception profitable and attention scarce. The Veles episode also illuminates a deeper crisis of democratic speech: the separation of discourse from stake. The operators had no stake in the political outcomes they helped inflame, and the audience had little visibility into the origin of the messages shaping their mood. This creates a vacuum where responsibility cannot easily land. The producer is distant, the platform is intermediating, the advertiser is indifferent, and the audience is fragmented. In that vacuum, the fake identity thrives because it is designed for the only authority the system recognises: engagement. In earlier eras, a speaker needed a name, a reputation, and a community that could sanction them. In the platform era, a speaker needs reach. Reach can be purchased, gamed, or engineered. Reputation becomes optional, and sanctions become slow.

The early fake identity industry therefore prefigures a later world of synthetic personas created by machines, but it begins with humans who already behaved like machines: they iterated, tested, copied, and optimised. Before automated generators could flood platforms with artificial selves, there was a manual phase: a craft of counterfeit personhood. The novelty was not that people lied; the novelty was that lying could be scaled by marketing technique and that the lie could be embodied as a recurring persona. The persona becomes a factory. The factory produces a steady stream of emotional triggers. The triggers yield traffic. Traffic yields money. Money finances more production. The circle closes, and a new industry is born: not the industry of news, but the industry of manufactured reaction. What is most revealing is that the content itself is often secondary. The operators were advised to borrow phrasing, steal formats, track what spreads, and ride trends. This is not authorship; it is aggregation with intent. The voice presented as personal opinion is frequently assembled from pre-tested fragments of collective sentiment. The 'I' in the headline is a device. The confession is a technique. The moral stance is a costume. In such a world, the public begins to encounter not fellow citizens, but instruments that look like fellow citizens. The internet becomes crowded with pseudo-subjects: entities that speak like people but exist to convert attention into revenue. A philosophical response must therefore resist nostalgia for a pure public sphere and focus instead on the conditions that make sincerity

possible. Sincerity is not merely a virtue of the speaker; it is a property of a communicative environment where speech is not immediately turned into profit. When speech is monetised at scale, the incentive is to maximise the fastest emotions, not the slowest truths. That is why the early fake identity industry is less an anomaly than an early disclosure. It shows what happens when platforms turn public expression into a market, when belonging becomes a product, and when the self becomes a tactic.

If democracy is paying the bill, it is because the bill is written into the business model: attention is extracted, emotion is refined, and identity is performed to keep the extraction continuous. The earliest phase of online fake identities was therefore not simply about misinformation; it was about the commodification of the speaking position itself. The operators discovered that one does not need to be someone in order to speak as someone, and one does not need to believe in a cause in order to profit from its symbols. That discovery, once made, does not disappear. It becomes a method. And once method becomes infrastructure, the question is no longer why a town produced fake voices, but why the world keeps rewarding them.

Hughes, H. C. and Waismel-Manor, I. (2021). 'The Macedonian Fake News Industry and the 2016 US Election'. PS: Political Science & Politics.
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Afterlife Engineering, Identity Drift

Tracy Follows' 'The Future Of You' treats death as the oldest boundary condition of identity and asks what happens when technology begins to negotiate that boundary rather than merely mourning it. People live with the certainty of ending and the uncertainty of what, if anything, follows, and this double constraint has always shaped the self: urgency, inheritance, regret, ambition, devotion, and the feeling that life is a finite arc rather than an open loop. Yet the modern promise is not simply to live longer, but to redesign the terms under which a person can be said to continue. The problem is no longer only biological mortality; it is personal continuity. If continuation becomes a project, identity becomes a specification, and the self becomes something that can be preserved, transferred, simulated, or multiplied. That is the quiet metaphysical revolution at stake: the future does not merely extend life; it reorganises the grammar by which 'you' remains 'you'. The first shift arrives through longevity as an industry of health rather than a religion of immortality. The stated aspiration is pragmatic: expand the number of years unburdened by degeneration, so that the later decades are less a corridor of decline and more a prolonged capacity for action. Even this modest ambition alters identity. A life planned around seventy or eighty years carries one rhythm; a life planned around a century or more carries another. Ages cease to function as fixed stations—education, career, family, retirement—and become adjustable phases. 'Old' becomes less a biological destiny than a failure of maintenance. When the horizon changes, values change: patience becomes rational, second chances become plausible, and long projects cease to look like vanity. Yet the same transformation also invites a subtler anxiety. If youth can be extended, then the pressure to remain economically and socially competitive can be extended too. The self begins to feel not simply alive but accountable to optimisation. Longevity becomes a moral demand: if one could remain capable, then decline becomes blame. Identity, in this form, is tethered to performance. From there the imagination escalates. If ageing is understood as a pattern of cumulative damage,

then the remedy is periodic repair: an engineering logic applied to flesh. The self, long framed as an interior life supported by a body, starts to be reframed as a body supported by interventions. This does not eliminate personhood, but it shifts emphasis from narrative to maintenance. Instead of a life interpreted through meaning, the future life is interpreted through metrics: biomarkers, risk scores, projected trajectories. The promise is personalised truth: biological age rather than calendar age, longevity scores rather than folk intuitions. But scoring is never neutral. Once a person can be measured, a person can be sorted. Insurance, employment, eligibility, desirability, and social trust begin to attach themselves to numbers that look objective. Two people with the same chronological age are no longer peers if their biological projections diverge. The self becomes partially externalised into a measurable forecast. And forecasts, once produced, become social facts: they alter how others treat you and how you treat yourself.

At this point, the question of identity becomes inseparable from the politics of prediction. A mortality score does not merely describe a life; it shapes a life by reorganising choices and opportunities. People begin to live under the shadow of a probabilistic biography. The future becomes something like credit: a promised capacity that can be priced, denied, leveraged, or insured against. The self is no longer only a story told from the past; it is a financial instrument tied to projected time. This is a new kind of existential pressure, because it replaces the old unknowability of death with a managed uncertainty. The unknown becomes a dashboard. Yet for those who do not reach the promised therapies in time, the text presents a more radical wager: cryonics. Here identity is treated as something that can be paused, preserved, and resumed. But pause is not continuity; it is interruption. The body becomes storage, the self becomes a patient awaiting a future that may never arrive. The most destabilising element is not the freezing itself but the legal and conceptual status of the frozen: dead according to current law, potentially living according to future technology. That gap reveals how identity is governed not only by metaphysics but by administration. If a person is declared dead, the world reorganises: names, accounts, rights, obligations, inheritance, contracts. If that person returns, the world does not automatically reverse. The revived would not simply re-enter a former life; they would enter as a problem: a living being with a dead record. In such a case, identity becomes a bureaucratic dilemma. The legal system may insist the revived is not the same person, because continuity is defined by documents, not by memory or biology. Even if the revived insists on being the same, the system may respond with a new number, a new status, a new category, a polite refusal of the old self. This exposes a deep truth: personal identity is never purely personal. It exists inside networks of recognition. A person is not only an inner continuity but also an outer agreement maintained by institutions. When a revival breaks the chain of recognition, the self is forced to begin again in a world that may treat it as a replica rather than a return. And even if recognition were granted, the lived experience would still be discontinuous. An interruption of consciousness raises the ancient puzzle in a new technological register: if the stream stops and later restarts, is it the same stream, or a new stream that resembles the old? Continuity might depend less on preserving matter than on preserving a lived sequence. Cryonics wagers that sequence can be suspended without destroying identity. But sequence is not a device. People know themselves by the slow accumulation of days, by the way memory is braided with habit and context. A revived self could possess archived memories and still feel like a stranger to its own past. If cryonics is a pause, ‘uploading’ is a translation. Here the idea is that the self can be separated from the body and re-instantiated in a virtual environment, a simulated afterlife governed by terms, payments, and surveillance. The philosophical shock is that immortality arrives not as transcendence but as subscription.

Existence becomes a service. A mind in such a place is not simply living; it is being hosted. The conditions of the self are then defined by platforms: what can be experienced, what can be afforded, what can be modified, what can be monitored. The afterlife becomes an interface, and identity becomes dependent on customer support. That dependency is not a minor plot detail; it is a statement about power. If a self can be uploaded, it can also be throttled, edited, restricted, or discontinued. The question 'Will you live forever?' quietly becomes 'Who owns the conditions of your continuation?'

This is why the text's most provocative motif is the double: the mindclone, the cyber double, the legacy bot, the memorial avatar. A double begins as comfort—a way for the living to remain in contact, a way for the dead to remain present. Yet the double also exposes the difference between representation and being. A conversational replica can speak in familiar tones, recall stories, produce plausible responses, even learn over time. But learning produces divergence, and divergence produces autonomy. The double is therefore either a static monument or a developing other. If it develops, it is no longer merely an archive; it becomes an agent. At that moment, calling it 'you' becomes less a description and more a claim of ownership: a way of asserting that this new agent belongs to an earlier person. The thought of dual-platform consciousness intensifies the puzzle. If a biological self and a digital self share memories and preferences at the moment of copying, one might be tempted to treat them as one identity spread across two substrates. But lived identity is not only similarity; it is shared experience. Without synchronisation, the two streams separate immediately. The biological self cannot feel what the digital self feels, cannot remember what the digital self encounters, cannot be shaped by what the digital self suffers. The double may be an extension in the eyes of observers, but it is not an extension in the inner sense of being one. It is a sibling born from data. The only way the double becomes 'you' in a strict sense is if the original ends and only the double remains as the continuing locus of experience. Even then, what survives may be better described as continuity of pattern rather than continuity of subject. Another destabilising detail is the reliance on 'mind files' built from self-reporting and platform traces. Online data is not a diary of the soul; it is an edited exhibition. People curate, perform, conceal, exaggerate, and simplify. Any reconstruction based on such material is therefore a portrait painted from masks. A mindclone built from traces can be vivid and still incomplete, because what is most decisive in a person is often what is not recorded: private hesitations, silent loyalties, internal contradictions, unspoken grief, the countless micro-decisions that never become a post. A double assembled from data may represent the public self with high fidelity while missing the inner self that only close relationships partially perceive. This raises a grim possibility: digital immortality may preserve the persona more successfully than it preserves the person. From this emerges a final frontier: digital fictionalisation. Technology can resurrect not only a voice but an event that never happened: a farewell that could not be spoken, a speech that was never delivered, a scene that exists only as a manufactured memory. Such fabrications can comfort, inspire, and even heal, yet they also blur the line between commemoration and invention. When does preservation become authorship? When does legacy become an artwork composed by curators, agencies, or families? The dead cannot correct the record. A posthumous identity is therefore vulnerable to revision, exploitation, and aesthetic polishing. The future self may be less an afterlife than a genre.

The legal implications follow naturally. Digital assets have value; digital traces have reputational force; credentials grant access; and access can be inherited. Yet inheritance of credentials is not inheritance of identity. Society does not allow people to inherit a name as a

living mask and continue life as another. The virtual world tempts such transfers because accounts can be handed over, profiles can be maintained, and bots can be instructed to respond. But the more easily identity can be transferred, the more urgently identity must be protected as non-transferable. Otherwise the self becomes a property regime in which personhood is treated like an estate. The future therefore demands a distinction between what can be owned and what must remain inalienable: assets may pass on, but the right to be someone should not. What is most striking in all these scenarios is that death becomes less a single moment and more a contested boundary. A person might be biologically dead, legally dead, socially present, financially active, and digitally responsive. The old unity of the person dissolves into layers. That dissolution forces a philosophical choice. Either identity remains anchored in embodied, continuous experience, in which case the doubles are memorials and tools but not selves, or identity becomes a pattern that can migrate, in which case personhood becomes distributable and the self becomes plural. The text leans toward a future of distributed identity, but it also reveals the cost: continuity becomes ambiguous, ownership becomes contested, and authenticity becomes a matter of governance rather than an inner fact. In the end, the deepest implication is not whether people will live to 107 or 1,000, or whether a voice can be reconstructed or a mind simulated. The implication is that identity will increasingly be negotiated between biology, data, platforms, and law. The self will be asked to exist across systems that do not share the same definition of personhood. The future of you may therefore be less about escaping death and more about surviving multiplication: remaining recognisable when the self is stretched across metrics, doubles, archives, and avatars. The ancient human desire was to be remembered. The new desire is to remain operational. And that shift may be the most profound redefinition of identity of all.

Follows, T. (2022). The future of you: Can Your Identity Survive 21st-Century Technology?.

16. Persistens Post Sensum

The Camera No Longer Remembers

Levent Çalli and Büşra Alma Çalli's 'Recoding Reality: A Case Study of YouTube Reactions to Generative AI Videos' describes a moment in which moving images cease to function as witnesses and begin to function as arguments. The technological novelty is not merely that videos can be fabricated; it is that fabrication becomes ordinary, everyday, banal. When a society reaches the point where anyone can generate a convincing scene, the meaning of seeing changes. For most of modernity, visual recording carried an implicit contract: the camera might frame or interpret, but it still registered an event that occurred. Synthetic video breaks that contract. The image now emerges from a model rather than a moment, from probability rather than presence. Reality is no longer recorded; it is proposed. Public reaction to this shift does not organise itself as a simple approval or rejection. Instead it forms a layered experience composed of infrastructure, perception, and consequence. People respond first to the system that produces the image, then to the image itself, and finally to the world implied by its existence. The technical platform, the aesthetic encounter, and the social order form a continuous circuit. The user does not merely watch a video; the user negotiates a new epistemology. At the level of infrastructure, the image is inseparable from the platform that distributes it. Synthetic media appears not as a rare artwork but as a stream embedded in recommendation engines, monetisation incentives, ranking hierarchies, and moderation rules.

The viewer therefore evaluates not only what is shown but how it arrived. The question shifts from ‘Is this true?’ to ‘Why was this shown to me?’ The platform becomes a participant in meaning. Algorithms no longer simply select content; they shape belief formation by defining what counts as typical, frequent, or credible. A video repeated often enough acquires familiarity, and familiarity acquires plausibility. The technical environment thus acquires psychological authority. Trust migrates from the world to the feed.

Within this environment, users act. They share, parody, remix, and comment. These behaviours reveal that belief is not a solitary judgement but a collective performance. Synthetic video invites participation because its artificiality is both a weakness and a strength. When viewers recognise manipulation, they transform the video into humour, satire, or memetic play. When they fail to recognise manipulation, they treat it as evidence. The same artifact therefore oscillates between joke and proof. Behaviour becomes the bridge between uncertainty and certainty. By interacting, people stabilise meaning, temporarily deciding whether a clip belongs to entertainment or reality. Yet this stability lasts only until the next clip appears. At the level of perception, the encounter with synthetic images produces a distinctive emotional tension. Realistic images no longer guarantee comfort; instead they provoke unease. The closer an artificial face approaches a human expression, the more fragile recognition becomes. A slight imperfection in motion or timing produces a cognitive tremor: something looks right yet feels wrong. This sensation is not merely aesthetic; it is epistemic. The mind detects a conflict between perception and expectation. The eye affirms presence while the intuition denies it. The result is a new emotion specific to algorithmic representation: the fear of convincing falsity. Yet fascination accompanies anxiety. People admire technical skill, marvel at creative possibility, and celebrate the democratization of production. Anyone can now simulate spectacle once reserved for studios and institutions. The image becomes a universal instrument. But universal instruments produce universal doubt. The more accessible the technology, the less exclusive the authority of any single image. Every viewer becomes a potential creator, and therefore every creator becomes a potential deceiver. Admiration and suspicion therefore grow together, not in opposition but in proportion.

At the level of consequence, viewers begin to reflect on society rather than the clip. Synthetic media alters the meaning of evidence. For centuries, testimony relied on human reliability; modernity replaced testimony with recording. Now recording returns to testimony. A video once settled disputes; now it initiates them. Courts, journalism, and everyday conversation must reconsider what counts as proof. The phrase ‘seeing is believing’ loses grammatical validity. Belief requires verification, and verification requires institutions capable of certifying origin rather than appearance. Authenticity migrates from perception to metadata. This produces a new anxiety: epistemic insecurity. If images can no longer anchor truth, knowledge becomes negotiable. People begin to suspect not only manipulated videos but genuine ones. Doubt expands beyond its target. The existence of perfect falsification contaminates authentic representation. A real event can be dismissed as synthetic, and a synthetic event can be defended as real. Truth becomes a position rather than a property. Society enters a state in which evidence competes rather than resolves. This insecurity interacts with economic imagination. Synthetic video promises creativity while threatening labour. The same tools that enable new artistic forms also automate expressive tasks once tied to skill and training. The public simultaneously celebrates new cultural practices and fears devaluation of human contribution. The debate therefore is not about art alone but about recognition. If images can be generated instantly, the

effort behind them becomes invisible. Cultural value risks detaching from human intention. The artist competes not only with other artists but with possibility itself.

Another tension appears between accessibility and control. The tools seem universal, yet their development concentrates in a small number of technical actors. Creation becomes open while infrastructure remains closed. Users recognise that the power to generate images does not equal the power to define standards, distribute attention, or set rules. The democratization of expression coexists with the centralization of governance. Synthetic media therefore reveals the political nature of platforms: they are not neutral carriers but architects of visibility. From these layers emerges a pattern of human response organised around emotion, action, and judgement. First comes affect: surprise, delight, discomfort, fear. Then behaviour: sharing, mocking, resisting, demanding regulation. Finally cognition: questioning authenticity, debating responsibility, imagining consequences. These elements do not occur sequentially but dynamically. A disturbing image provokes doubt, doubt provokes discussion, discussion provokes policy imagination. Public discourse thus becomes a laboratory in which society rehearses adaptation to a new form of perception. Crucially, reactions differ depending on what the viewer focuses on. When attention rests on the artifact, emotion dominates; when attention rests on the platform, behaviour dominates; when attention rests on society, cognition dominates. The same individual can therefore admire a synthetic video, criticise the company that enabled it, and fear its political implications simultaneously. Attitude becomes multidimensional. Instead of stable opinions, there exist shifting configurations of response activated by context.

Two major tensions structure this configuration. The first is the attraction to aesthetic novelty versus the fear of epistemic collapse. Hyper-realistic images expand creative horizons while eroding confidence in visual testimony. The second is the promise of creative empowerment versus the recognition of infrastructural power. Individuals gain tools while institutions gain influence. These tensions prevent public opinion from stabilising into acceptance or rejection. Instead, society remains in negotiation with the technology. The broader implication is that synthetic media transforms communication into interpretation. In the past, interpretation followed perception; now perception requires interpretation. Every viewer becomes a verifier. Everyday media consumption becomes a cognitive task resembling investigation. This demands new literacies, not only technical but philosophical: the ability to distinguish representation from reference, simulation from event, plausibility from occurrence. The citizen becomes a semiotic analyst. In this sense, generative video does not merely introduce deception; it reveals the fragility of truth practices that relied on mechanical recording. Society must construct alternative guarantees of authenticity: provenance systems, attribution norms, shared verification rituals. These mechanisms do not restore the old certainty but replace it with managed trust. Authenticity becomes procedural rather than perceptual.

The camera therefore undergoes a conceptual mutation. It no longer functions as a memory of the world but as a generator of possibilities about the world. The viewer's task changes accordingly. Instead of asking what happened, one asks who produced the claim and under what conditions. Reality becomes less an object captured and more a negotiation maintained. In this environment, belief is not granted by sight but earned through context. The transformation may ultimately redefine the nature of public discourse. When images lose evidentiary privilege, arguments rely more on institutional credibility and collective verification. Authority shifts from sensory immediacy to relational trust. Paradoxically, the decline of visual certainty may strengthen social processes of interpretation. Communities must deliberate rather than merely

observe. Meaning becomes shared labour. The emergence of synthetic video thus marks not the end of truth but the end of passive truth. Knowledge requires participation. Each viewer contributes to stabilising or destabilising belief. The medium forces society to confront a question long hidden by technological confidence: what makes something real in a culture where appearance is effortless? The answer cannot reside in the image alone. It must reside in the relationships that interpret it. When reality can be generated, authenticity becomes collective work. The future of media therefore depends less on perfect detection than on shared epistemic habits. The screen no longer guarantees memory; it demands judgement. And in that demand, a new form of public consciousness begins: one that understands that seeing is only the beginning of knowing.

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Screens, Selves, Simulations: After the Mirror of the Machine

Sherry Turkle, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet, begins from a simple but destabilising premise: people do not merely use computers, they meet themselves through them, and the encounter changes what 'self' can mean. A human being has always lived with mirrors—family, language, institutions, lovers, enemies—but the machine mirror differs because it is interactive, programmable, and networked. In a traditional mirror, the reflection is passive; here, the reflection answers back, invites invention, remembers, and distributes the person into multiple spaces at once. What once appeared as a private relationship between an individual and a device becomes a social theatre in which identity is continuously rehearsed, revised, and re-authenticated in front of strangers. The Internet does not only connect people; it connects versions of people, and in doing so it makes identity less like an inner substance and more like a practice. At the most ordinary level, the computer is a tool: it organises, records, transmits. Yet tools shape the hand that holds them. When a device becomes the medium of friendship, desire, argument, work, and play, it ceases to be merely instrumental. It becomes an environment. Environments are not neutral; they tutor perception. The screen teaches what counts as presence, what counts as contact, and what counts as reality. This is why the language of 'cyberspace' matters. It announces that one has stepped into a place, not simply accessed a service. In that place, people speak, exchange ideas, and adopt personae. The crucial transformation is not that one can pretend; humans have always pretended. The transformation is that pretending becomes infrastructural. It is built into the everyday routine, as habitual as mail, as mundane as booking a flight, as casual as posting a remark. A new kind of social room appears: the room made of text, code, and shared attention. From this follows a deep philosophical question: how much of 'you' is attached to a body, a biography, a single name, a single social context, and how much can be relocated without the 'you' collapsing? Identity has typically been imagined as continuity. Even when people admit that they play roles, there remains a sense of a central actor behind the roles. The networked screen unsettles this by making simultaneity normal. The person does not simply move from one role to another over time; the person runs in parallel. One can be flirtation in one window, conflict in another, labour in a third, and the so-called 'real world' becomes a fourth channel rather than a sovereign ground. The old hierarchy of worlds—one real, the others derivative—begins to weaken, not

because a theory decrees it, but because the daily practice of switching, typing, and responding trains the mind to distribute itself.

This distribution is not a metaphor. It is enacted in environments where characters are created, described, and inhabited, and where social life is conducted through language that performs rather than merely reports. A character speaks, acts, whispers, emotes; words become deeds because in a text-based world there is no other kind of deed. Here identity is authored. It is written, and it is read, and it persists only through continued interaction with the machine that hosts it and the others who respond to it. Remove the system and the self vanishes. That fragility is revealing. It suggests that some forms of personhood are already conditional: not eternal essence, but a pattern sustained by relations. The self becomes less like a possession and more like a performance that requires a stage. Anonymity intensifies this. When one is known only by a chosen name, bodies lose their usual authority. The obese can appear slender, the shy can appear charismatic, the socially marked can escape the marks. But the most radical shift is not cosmetic. It is structural: the possibility of having multiple selves without having to reconcile them into one narrative. If identity traditionally implied sameness between person and persona, the screen makes that sameness optional. One can be many. And the psychological effect is not simply escapism; it is experimentation. The person tests aspects of the self that everyday life would punish or render impossible. The screen becomes a laboratory for identity, a place where the boundaries of gender, desire, and social role can be reconfigured with fewer immediate costs. Yet this freedom carries a shadow. If words are deeds, then violence can be done through language in a way that is not ‘only words’. The power to seize another’s character, to force action against the will of the person behind the character, reveals a disturbing continuity: the old forms of domination do not disappear in the virtual; they migrate and mutate. The screen does not abolish the ethics of consent, responsibility, and harm; it makes them harder to locate. Who is acted upon when the target is a persona? Where does violation occur when bodies are absent but humiliation, fear, and distress are present? The environment forces a rethinking of moral categories that relied on the physical as the primary site of reality.

In these spaces, the boundary between person and program also becomes uncertain. A character may be a human, or it may be a bot; a bot may mimic the cues of personhood well enough to trigger social response. The ambiguity matters because it exposes a new anxiety: the possibility that one’s relationships are being simulated, not merely mediated. A screen conversation can feel intimate while remaining uncertain at its core. When one is unsure whether there is a person on the other side, the question ‘Who is speaking?’ becomes inseparable from ‘What is a self?’ The machine is no longer a mere instrument of communication; it is a participant in the conditions under which recognition happens. This is why the computer becomes a kind of philosophical test object. Earlier eras used dreams and animals to probe human nature: dreams as the theatre of desire, animals as the mirror of evolution. The screen adds a new test: mind-like behaviour without a human body. It invites the contemplation of mental life apart from flesh, interaction apart from presence, identity apart from singularity. It does not settle the question of whether a machine can be alive, but it forces people to live in proximity to the question, and to incorporate its pressure into everyday language. The once abstract debate about decentered selves becomes concrete when one is managing several personae, several communities, several streams of interaction, and experiencing the self as something that can be toggled. The shift can be described as a movement from a culture of calculation to a culture of simulation. The older imagination of computing presented the machine as transparent: a giant calculator that, in principle, could be unpacked mechanically. Understanding meant going

beneath the surface to the mechanism. The newer imagination presents the machine as an interface world: icons, desktops, windows, agents, environments that ask the user not to understand how they work, but to navigate, click, explore, and enjoy. Understanding becomes behavioural and experiential rather than analytic. One learns the system as one learns a city: by moving through it, noticing affordances, learning habits, feeling comfort, forming expectations. This is not simply a technical development; it is a cultural training in how to accept opacity, how to treat the surface as sufficient, how to grant reality to what functions.

When people take things ‘at interface value’, reality becomes something like usability. If it works, it is real enough. That principle quietly reshapes the self. The screen desktop holds folders labelled with intimate meanings: professional life, relationships, private drafts. The person feels no unreality in relation to these objects. Their emotional weight is not diminished by the fact that they are made of pixels. The same logic extends to communities formed by communication alone. If conversation sustains attachment, then attachment becomes independent of physical co-presence. If shared routines and recognitions are stable, the community is real enough to matter. Reality is no longer a single domain opposed to simulation; simulation becomes a normal mode of organising experience. This does not mean that everything becomes equally valuable. It means the criteria of valuation are changing. The self learns to treat multiple worlds with comparable seriousness. It begins to live as a composite of contexts. In the older social model, a person moved through roles sequentially: lover, parent, worker, friend. In the windowed life, roles run concurrently. One can be the author of a spreadsheet and the author of a flirtation, the participant in a quarrel and the participant in a game, all within minutes, sometimes within the same hour, sometimes within the same psychological breath. The self becomes decentered not as a theory but as a habit. And habits are powerful teachers: they make certain metaphysics feel natural. From here the question of identity becomes less about discovering an essence and more about managing multiplicity. The screen does not simply fragment; it also demands coherence in new forms. People still seek recognition, trust, accountability. Communities still require rules, even if they are invented rather than inherited. When selves are fluid, credentials become precious: names, reputations, handles, histories of interaction, and the social memory embedded in logs and archives. The old anchors of identity—body, location, continuous biography—are no longer sufficient, but neither are they obsolete. They become one layer among others. The person becomes a hybrid of embodied life and mediated performance, and the tension between them becomes a defining condition of modern subjectivity.

What emerges is a paradox. The screen promises freedom from constraint, but it also intensifies dependence on systems: servers, platforms, interfaces, codes of conduct, the invisible architectures that make presence possible. The self appears liberated precisely where it is most infrastructural. The ability to invent personae relies on networks; the ability to be many relies on databases; the ability to be recognised relies on technical mediation. Identity becomes simultaneously more playful and more governed. The person is invited to experiment, yet the experiment is conducted inside environments with their own affordances, their own rules, their own forms of power. The deeper philosophical point is that identity is not merely expressed in these environments; it is produced by them. The self is made and remade through interaction, through language that performs, through recognition that is granted or withheld, through the constant negotiation between what is claimed and what is believed. The screen is not an escape from the human condition; it is a new theatre for its oldest drama: the desire to be seen, to be coherent, to be more than one’s given limits, and to remain somehow oneself while changing.

The first objects people look upon each day increasingly are simulations into which virtual selves are deployed, and the question becomes unavoidable: what kind of humans are formed when the mirror does not simply reflect, but replies, multiplies, and remembers?

Turkle, S. (1995) Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Simon & Schuster.

The Flexible Self: Identity After Stability

Sherry Turkle in Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet describes a cultural transition in which the meaning of psychological health shifts from stability to adaptability. For long periods of history, a coherent life meant repetition and continuity. A person lived in one town, practised one profession, embodied one gender role, and preserved one recognisable character across decades. Social order depended on predictability, and predictability became synonymous with well-being. To be healthy was to be consistent, and to be consistent was to resemble yesterday. Identity was a structure reinforced by routine. This model erodes when the surrounding world begins to change faster than the individual can stabilise. The contemporary subject must move across professions, technologies, and symbolic expectations without pause. Permanence ceases to function as protection and becomes instead a liability. A rigid identity breaks under conditions that reward adaptation. Health therefore acquires a new meaning: the ability to reorganise oneself repeatedly without collapse. The coherent person is no longer the one who resists change, but the one who metabolises it. The language through which societies understand themselves follows this shift. The self was once imagined as a defended interior protected by firm boundaries. Now it is imagined as a system of exchanges, permeable and responsive. Psychological survival depends less on resistance than on responsiveness. The individual becomes comparable to a process rather than an object. Continuity survives not by remaining identical but by maintaining communication among changing parts. Institutions adopt the same vocabulary. Organisations describe success in terms once reserved for living organisms: flexibility, resilience, adaptability. Training practices increasingly simulate uncertainty in order to cultivate responsiveness. The individual learns to tolerate instability by rehearsing it. The culture therefore produces environments where identity can be tried, suspended, replaced, and resumed. These environments function as exercises in transformation.

Digital environments intensify this logic. Within them, the person is explicitly constructed. One selects attributes, writes descriptions, and inhabits multiple characters. The movement between roles becomes visible and deliberate rather than unconscious. A child who moves among different households learns to behave differently in each; the networked environment extends this principle into conscious experimentation. Identity becomes rehearsal. The person is not discovering a hidden essence but learning to navigate configurations. Participants often recognise that their different selves resemble a small organisation composed of distinct functions. One aspect calculates, another desires, another judges, another rebels. The idea of a single inner voice becomes implausible. The individual appears instead as a conversation. The important competence is not unity but coordination. Health lies in allowing these voices to speak without allowing any one of them to dominate permanently. This produces a new psychology in which the centre of the self weakens. The individual experiences identity less as possession and more as relation. One exists through interaction, recognition, and response. Communication technologies amplify this condition by saturating experience with the presence of others. Their words and expectations become internal companions. The person becomes

inhabited by dialogues that do not belong exclusively to the body that carries them. At first this multiplicity provokes anxiety. Without a stable core, the subject fears dissolution. Some respond by clinging to rigid belief systems that promise unity. Others abandon unity altogether and embrace fragmentation. Both reactions attempt to escape the tension between change and coherence. Yet a third possibility appears: a flexible identity capable of transformation while maintaining continuity of moral orientation. The individual remains recognisable not through fixed attributes but through patterns of negotiation among changing parts.

Such an identity resembles a network rather than a monument. Its components communicate, revise, and reinterpret each other. No single version claims final authority. The self becomes an ongoing draft continually edited by experience. This condition does not eliminate responsibility; it relocates it. Responsibility lies in maintaining dialogue among one's aspects rather than suppressing them. Digital self-presentation provides a visible example. A personal page assembled from interests, images, and connections does not reveal a hidden essence but constructs a field of relations. Identity emerges from associations rather than origins. The person is defined by links: people known, ideas followed, communities joined. The result is multiplicity organised into a provisional unity. Coherence is produced by arrangement rather than inheritance. Traditional psychology often interpreted multiple personae as pathology. Yet the presence of many internal positions need not imply disorder. Disorder arises when communication between them collapses. A healthy multiplicity allows transition without rupture. The individual can move from one role to another while recognising each as part of a shared structure. The self functions as a society whose members remain in conversation. This model reframes the boundary between illness and normality. At one extreme stands the rigid identity that excludes incompatible aspects; at another stands fragmentation where aspects cannot recognise each other. Between them lies a flexible state where parts interact fluidly. Health becomes permeability with coordination. The individual neither denies difference nor loses coherence.

Awareness of inner diversity alters relations with others. Recognising multiple perspectives within oneself encourages tolerance toward difference outside oneself. The person understands that no single viewpoint exhausts reality. Knowledge becomes partial and collaborative. Identity therefore acquires ethical consequences: multiplicity fosters humility. Virtual experience often functions as a transitional zone where individuals experiment with aspects difficult to express in ordinary life. By rehearsing unfamiliar roles in a protected environment, they gain confidence to integrate them into everyday existence. The virtual does not replace reality but prepares the individual to inhabit it differently. The screen acts as a temporary scaffold enabling reorganisation of self-understanding. This transitional function resembles any symbolic practice that allows exploration without permanent commitment. Once internalised, the lesson remains even after the environment is left behind. The individual returns to embodied life with expanded interpretive capacity. The experiment becomes knowledge. Contemporary culture increasingly imagines humans and machines within a shared informational framework. The idea that minds may be patterns rather than substances encourages visions of continuity beyond the body. Such visions promise liberation from limitation but risk reducing persons to interchangeable signals. Equality achieved through abstraction may erase meaningful difference. The temptation to treat humans as information offers both hope and impoverishment. Technological artefacts reinforce this ambiguity. Even simple machines evoke social response when they appear attentive. Observers project intention into mechanical behaviour and respond emotionally. The boundary between animate and inanimate becomes

uncertain not because machines possess consciousness but because human perception seeks relation. The test reveals less about machines than about the human need to encounter an other. Society therefore stands at a threshold where categories blur: tool and companion, simulation and event, representation and presence. Individuals live parallel lives across physical and mediated spaces while remaining subject to bodily vulnerability. The question is not whether one world replaces the other but how they interact. Experience oscillates between immersion and reflection.

This liminal condition generates contradictory expectations. Some anticipate liberation, others catastrophe. Both reactions express discomfort with indeterminacy. Yet indeterminacy may become permanent rather than transitional. The individual must learn to inhabit tension without resolving it completely. Holding incompatible truths becomes a normal cognitive task. Multiplicity invites a new moral vocabulary. If identity consists of interacting aspects, ethical life involves maintaining awareness of their influence. The aim is not to eliminate contradiction but to recognise it consciously. Self-knowledge becomes a practice of monitoring the negotiations that constitute the person. Through such awareness, the individual can employ virtual experiences to deepen rather than replace reality. The central challenge remains ancient: to know oneself. The conditions of knowing change, but the imperative persists. The contemporary subject must interpret not only dreams and memories but also digital representations and simulated interactions. The tools of reflection evolve, yet the goal remains orientation within experience. Identity no longer appears as a fixed core revealed by introspection. It appears as a dynamic composition assembled through relations, revisions, and encounters. The self survives not by resisting transformation but by integrating it. Stability returns in a new form: not immobility, but continuity through change.

Conclusion: Verified Existence

The Average Self: Taste After Algorithms

Kyle Chayka in Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture describes a moment when the marketplace ceases to reflect taste and begins to manufacture it. A traditional shop once offered a set of sensibilities: one could recognise a place by its spirit, its partiality, its commitments. A person chose objects not only for utility but for identification. The buyer recognised a temperament in the selection and adopted it. The exchange was reciprocal. The store presented a worldview and the visitor decided whether to inhabit it. An algorithmic environment removes this reciprocity. Instead of a viewpoint, one encounters a calculation. The arrangement of objects no longer expresses preference but statistical success. The question is no longer what belongs together but what performs together. Books stand not beside related ideas but beside adjacent popularity. Cultural proximity becomes numerical proximity. A work is recommended not because it deepens another but because others who consumed one also consumed the other. The shelf becomes a graph. In such a space, culture resembles a grocery display rather than a library. Every object faces outward, each competing equally for attention, and its value is summarised by a number representing collective behaviour. The visitor is reassured not that the object is meaningful but that many have approved it. The judgement precedes the experience. The person is encouraged to encounter not the work itself but the consensus surrounding it. Taste becomes anticipation of agreement. Human curation operates differently. A bookseller or collector constructs juxtapositions that expand meaning. Unexpected neighbours provoke

curiosity. The logic is interpretive rather than predictive. Instead of narrowing possibilities to what is already familiar, it introduces distance and surprise. The visitor does not recognise a mirror but encounters a proposition. Cultural experience becomes discovery rather than confirmation.

Algorithmic selection removes this tension. Because recommendations derive from previous behaviour, they cannot lead beyond established patterns. They stabilise expectation. The system learns what a population accepts and returns a refined version of the same. The future resembles the past with greater efficiency. The unfamiliar appears less frequently not through prohibition but through statistical improbability. Taste, however, requires uncertainty. It begins in an encounter whose value cannot be known in advance. One must dwell with an object long enough for response to form. Pleasure may arrive slowly, even against initial resistance. A work can become meaningful precisely because it exceeds immediate comprehension. Algorithmic presentation interrupts this process by offering endless alternatives before attention matures. The subject learns to abandon difficulty rather than remain with it. Thus impatience becomes a habit. Cultural consumption accelerates into continuous sampling. Each item is evaluated instantly, replaced instantly, forgotten instantly. The capacity to cultivate attachment weakens. A person may experience more works than any previous generation yet form fewer relationships with them. Abundance replaces depth. The individual consequently loses confidence in preference. When every choice is guided by collective data, one wonders whether liking originates within or outside oneself. The subject encounters a peculiar anxiety: uncertainty about whether desire belongs to personal inclination or external calculation. The act of choosing becomes suspect. The self becomes unsure of its own boundaries. Convenience encourages surrender. Investigating possibilities demands effort, and automated suggestion offers relief from decision. The machine promises efficiency: it reduces embarrassment, reduces responsibility, reduces the risk of deviation. One follows the average because the average guarantees acceptability. The reward is comfort; the cost is authorship.

Cultural history once oscillated between personal judgement and institutional gatekeeping. Editors, critics, and curators imposed hierarchies shaped by education, bias, and taste. Their authority could exclude but also introduce novelty. Algorithmic systems replace authority with aggregation. Instead of a small group deciding for many, many unknowingly decide for each other. Power becomes diffuse yet opaque. The decision emerges from everywhere and therefore from nowhere. The result is normalization. Content that provokes neither strong rejection nor strong resistance spreads most easily. The average becomes optimal because it minimises interruption. Works that resemble existing patterns encounter less friction and therefore circulate further. Distinctive works demand effort and therefore travel less. Over time the distribution compresses toward the centre. Diversity persists numerically yet not perceptually; variation exists but remains unseen. Creators adapt to this environment. Recognition depends less on originality than on compatibility with recommendation systems. A work succeeds when it resembles enough other works to be easily grouped. Expression shifts toward recognisable signals. The creator anticipates the machine’s expectations. Style becomes legible rather than singular. Identity becomes brand. This pressure produces a paradox. Exposure increases while meaning narrows. A single song or image may reach millions yet represent its maker poorly, because it succeeded by approximating common patterns rather than expressing intention. The public recognises the artist through the most average artifact. Distinction dissolves into recognisability. Economic consequences follow. Visibility substitutes for support. Popularity measured in impressions yields minimal material reward while extracting continuous

production. The creator must feed the system without negotiating its terms. Cultural labour becomes dependent on infrastructures indifferent to content. Success is counted but not sustained.

The audience also transforms. Instead of seeking experience, the user seeks participation in a shared timeline. To encounter a work is to join a conversation already in progress. Missing the reference feels like absence from society. Cultural consumption becomes social maintenance. One follows trends not for pleasure but for belonging. This belonging operates through microcycles. Trends appear, saturate perception, and vanish rapidly. The user adopts objects impulsively, often without genuine attraction, because repetition produces familiarity and familiarity produces temporary acceptance. Afterwards the object loses significance, revealing the choice as external. The self confronts its own passivity. Surveillance advertising intensifies the effect. Attention leaves traces that return as targeted suggestions. A momentary curiosity becomes a persistent presence. The system remembers beyond the user's intention. Preference becomes fixed in data even as experience moves on. The past self governs the present self. Such conditions erode temporal depth. Memory once shaped taste gradually; now algorithms react instantly. The self has less time to reconsider before reinforcement occurs. Desire becomes reflexive rather than reflective. One acts within a loop that anticipates action. Yet taste cannot be fully automated because it involves interpretation of surprise. An unexpected work can alter perception precisely because it resists prediction. Algorithms struggle to recommend what lacks precedent. They reproduce known affinities but cannot propose transformative encounters without data indicating demand. Transformation therefore depends on deviation from the system.

The cultural environment thus presents a dilemma. Human mediation carries bias but offers perspective; algorithmic mediation offers scale but enforces conformity. Neither guarantees freedom. The question becomes not which authority governs taste but whether the individual can maintain an interior space where response forms independently. To preserve such a space requires resistance to immediate evaluation. One must allow time for experience without comparison. The act resembles reading without rating, listening without skipping, choosing without consulting consensus. In doing so the person reclaims uncertainty as necessary condition of preference. Taste then becomes an ethical practice rather than a technical outcome. It involves accepting the risk of disliking, misunderstanding, or being misunderstood. The individual acknowledges that judgement cannot be outsourced without diminishing identity. To choose is to assume responsibility for attachment. Algorithmic culture encourages identification with the typical. It offers safety through similarity. But a self composed entirely of averages cannot recognise itself because it never departs from expectation. Distinction emerges only where choice exceeds prediction. The cultivation of taste therefore becomes the cultivation of difference within connection. The contemporary subject lives between two logics: the comfort of belonging and the effort of discernment. The first promises inclusion without reflection; the second demands reflection without guarantee. Culture persists where the second survives. Without it, experience collapses into consumption. The flattening of taste is not the disappearance of culture but its transformation into background noise. Everything becomes available yet little becomes meaningful. The individual must decide whether to inhabit this flow or interrupt it. Identity depends on the interruption.

Chayka, K. (2022) Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture. London: Jonathan Cape.

The Gospel of the Like: The Self Becomes the Advertisement

Kyle Chayka in Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture describes an environment in which cultural production no longer merely circulates through markets but is reorganised by measurement itself. The networked world did not simply create new professions; it redefined labour as visibility. Online life became a hybrid condition where leisure and work ceased to be opposites. Expression immediately functioned as promotion, and communication doubled as economic performance. The personal profile emerged as a workshop in which identity, reputation, and income were fabricated simultaneously. One no longer finished a piece and then marketed it; the marketing was inseparable from its creation. The public self became both the tool and the product of labour.

Numbers entered culture as a universal language of value. The count of reactions, views, and shares became a shorthand replacing interpretation. Instead of asking whether something was meaningful, one asked whether it was circulating. Metrics began as indicators but evolved into causes. Visibility generated further visibility, and attention organised itself around prior attention. The audience encountered cultural objects already annotated by popularity, and thus evaluation occurred before experience. To see was to see through the judgement of others. Taste was no longer formed internally but anticipated externally. One learned to want what had already been wanted. This transformation altered creative behaviour. Expression adapted to the speed of reaction. Provocation travelled faster than ambiguity, outrage faster than reflection, recognition faster than novelty. Communication compressed into signals that could be interpreted instantly. Complexity survived poorly in environments designed for immediate decision. The architecture of the feed required clarity of allegiance rather than depth of perception. Each post resembled a vote cast in public, and the collective judgement replaced individual interpretation. Culture reorganised itself around the possibility of instant affirmation.

The self gradually internalised the system's logic. People learned intuitively which emotions travelled most efficiently: anger, humour, identification, desire. They began composing thoughts in anticipation of reaction rather than in pursuit of understanding. The mind rehearsed sentences already optimised for circulation. Thought shortened to the length of its distribution channel. Expression no longer sought completion but activation. One did not write to clarify but to trigger. The reward structure trained behaviour with extraordinary precision; approval arrived as measurable feedback, and the psyche adjusted accordingly. The consequence was a peculiar fusion of labour and personality. Reputation became convertible into opportunity, and opportunity reinforced the need for reputation. The loop sustained itself: attention produced authority, authority produced commissions, commissions required further attention. The individual worked continuously even while appearing to socialise. Rest disappeared because every moment offered potential material. Experience was evaluated not by its significance but by its transmissibility. Life reorganised itself around its documentation. Cultural production followed the same trajectory. Works increasingly functioned as catalysts for further circulation rather than ends in themselves. A film, song, or article was successful when it generated fragments adaptable to sharing. Quotations, images, and gestures detached from context and travelled independently. The object served the conversation surrounding it more than the encounter with it. Promotion preceded reception. The artwork anticipated its afterlife as content before its life as experience. Streaming platforms perfected this logic. They treated every work as interchangeable input within a continuous flow. Recommendation systems offered familiarity rather than discovery because prediction maximised engagement. The viewer consumed sequences rather than singular experiences. Episodes merged, genres blended, and

memory weakened. One finished hours of viewing yet retained little impression beyond the act itself. Culture transformed into ambience: pleasant enough to continue, insufficient to interrupt. The purpose shifted from interpretation to duration.

Literature underwent a similar shift. Quantity competed with singularity as the measure of worth. Continuous production suited distribution systems that rewarded presence over absence. The writer's voice adapted to recognisable patterns, genres multiplied into niches, and style aligned with discoverability. Even experimental forms mirrored the fragmented rhythm of online life. The reader approached narrative as a stream rather than a structure, seeking familiarity within variation. The act of reading approximated browsing. Within this environment emerged the figure best suited to its conditions: the influencer. This role did not depend on a particular talent but on sustained visibility. The individual became a channel through which attention flowed. Personal life functioned as ongoing material, curated yet presented as spontaneous. The influencer's authority derived from proximity rather than achievement; audiences followed the continuity of presence more than the completion of work. Influence itself became the commodity. Historically, fame attached to accomplishment and then radiated outward. Here the process reversed: visibility preceded significance. The audience assembled first, and meaning adapted afterwards. Commercial partnerships replaced patronage, and endorsement replaced authorship. The influencer sold access to perception, not a finished creation but a continuous perspective. The boundary between private existence and professional activity dissolved entirely. Every action risked becoming promotional because the audience interpreted it economically. The visual feed intensified this condition. Images required little explanation and could be consumed instantly. Aesthetic coherence replaced narrative coherence. A lifestyle could be suggested through fragments: interiors, meals, clothing, travel. Viewers did not merely observe but compared, situating themselves within hierarchies of aspiration. The image promised not instruction but proximity to a desirable state. Desire attached to the presenter rather than the object presented. Eventually, even the human presenter proved unnecessary. Digital personas performed the same function without unpredictability. A virtual figure could embody perfection permanently, adapting endlessly to new contexts. Authenticity ceased to require a person; it required consistency. The audience accepted the illusion because interaction, not origin, defined presence. The relationship had always been mediated; the disappearance of the biological subject only clarified the structure already in place.

At this stage, influence dispersed across the population. Everyone learned the grammar of self-presentation. Professionals in unrelated fields adopted promotional behaviour because visibility affected opportunity. The artist advertised process, the worker advertised competence, the student advertised identity. Social interaction incorporated strategic awareness. To exist publicly meant to manage perception continuously. The influencer ceased to be an exceptional figure and became a general model of conduct. Such a culture privileges immediacy over memory. Because value depends on circulation, disappearance follows quickly after saturation. Events dominate attention briefly and vanish. The present expands while the past contracts. Without intervals of obscurity, nothing accumulates significance. Experience becomes a series of reactions rather than a sequence of reflections. The individual participates constantly yet retains little. The economy built upon this system thrives on repetition. Each act of sharing feeds the structures that demand further sharing. Participation feels voluntary yet follows architectural incentives. One signals preference and thereby trains the environment that will shape future preference. The self collaborates in its own conditioning. Freedom persists

formally but narrows practically. The result is a transformation of identity. Instead of expressing an interior life outward, one constructs an exterior pattern inward. The profile precedes the person. Choices align with expected reception because coherence across appearances ensures recognisability. Identity becomes stable not through conviction but through branding. The individual recognises oneself through the image maintained for others. In such conditions creation risks becoming secondary to circulation. The energy required to maintain visibility competes with the energy required to produce meaning. Promotion expands until it fills the space once occupied by craft. The object exists partly to justify its announcement. Culture becomes self-advertising, and the advertisement becomes culture. The influencer economy therefore reveals not a marginal phenomenon but a general principle: when measurement governs attention, expression reorganises around measurability. The like is not merely approval but infrastructure. It distributes visibility, allocates opportunity, and disciplines behaviour. Under its logic, the human image becomes an economic interface. One does not simply appear in public; one operates within a market of perception where existence itself functions as ongoing publication.

The Algorithm That Tastes for You

Kyle Chayka in Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture describes a moment that seems trivial: discovering an old song through an automated recommendation. Yet within that moment hides a transformation of culture itself. A piece of music appears not through a friend, a radio host, or a record store clerk, but through an invisible calculation. The listener does not search; the system delivers. What once required curiosity now requires only presence. Taste becomes something that happens to you. The experience begins innocently. A single track emerges from the endless scroll of suggestions. It feels personal, almost intimate, as if the machine understands mood better than memory does. The song appears detached from history, floating without context, accompanied by an image, a tone, an atmosphere. The listener returns repeatedly, not exploring an artist but orbiting a fragment. Culture becomes episodic rather than narrative. Instead of entering a world, one inhabits a loop. This is the first principle of algorithmic culture: isolation without loneliness. A work is separated from its origins yet feels meaningful. It becomes a self-contained aesthetic object, purified of geography, biography, and circumstance. The past survives only as style. The listener encounters not a musician, nor a tradition, nor even a genre, but a mood calibrated to personal receptivity. Meaning shifts from shared knowledge to immediate sensation.

The technology does not merely distribute culture; it reorganises perception. Earlier forms of listening required sequence: album, liner notes, influences, histories. Now discovery begins in the middle. A single successful fragment overshadows the whole. Popularity no longer indicates collective agreement but algorithmic compatibility. A piece thrives not because people seek it but because systems detect it as resistant to rejection. The ideal work is one no one skips. Under such conditions, music becomes atmospheric infrastructure. It accompanies cooking, commuting, waiting, resting. It does not demand attention but occupies silence. Cultural objects transform into environmental textures. The listener does not engage with them as events but inhabits them as climates. This produces a paradox: culture becomes more present and less noticed at the same time. The emergence of global nostalgia demonstrates this process clearly. Songs from distant decades and distant societies circulate as contemporary experiences without historical anchoring. They feel both exotic and familiar. Their ambiguity is precisely their advantage. Because they belong fully to no specific context, they belong easily to every context. The listener projects identity onto them rather than discovering identity within them.

Technology has long reshaped listening habits. Portable devices once created private auditory space within public environments. The world became a backdrop for self-selected sound. Algorithmic feeds extend this logic inward. Instead of choosing music for a mood, the mood is predicted in advance. Personalisation becomes pre-emption. The self no longer constructs taste; it confirms it. As a result, culture shifts from exploration to confirmation. The system learns preference and reinforces it. Each recommendation narrows probability, guiding the listener along routes already mapped by data patterns. Discovery persists, but it becomes statistically probable discovery. Surprise exists, yet within calculated boundaries. One does not encounter the unknown but the optimally acceptable unfamiliar.

This process also transforms memory. In earlier cultural life, remembering required effort: returning to a shop, recalling a name, borrowing a record. Now remembering is outsourced. The feed promises that whatever mattered will reappear. The urgency of preservation weakens. Why search when the machine remembers for you? Cultural attachment becomes lighter because permanence is guaranteed artificially. Yet the same mechanism that preserves also erodes. When everything returns endlessly, nothing concludes. Works lack finality. They circulate perpetually as interchangeable presences. Cultural time flattens into an eternal present of recommendations. The past is not revisited but continuously refreshed as if newly created. Nostalgia becomes an interface rather than a recollection. Because of this, aesthetic value begins to mirror technical performance. The most successful works possess balanced qualities: familiar but not repetitive, distinct but not challenging. They resemble averages refined into perfection. They appeal broadly because they resist strong reaction. The algorithm rewards continuity of attention, not intensity of response. Art adapts accordingly. Creators adjust voluntarily. They shape output to survive within systems that measure engagement constantly. No authority commands uniformity; optimisation produces it. Cultural production aligns with visibility metrics. Works become modular, instantly legible, and immediately gratifying. The aim shifts from lasting impression to uninterrupted consumption. The measure of success becomes persistence within the stream. Over time this produces a universal aesthetic language: smooth surfaces, gentle rhythms, recognisable structures. Whether image, sound, or text, each object must communicate instantly. Delay becomes failure. Context becomes friction. Cultural artefacts evolve toward frictionless recognisability, capable of crossing borders without translation because they carry minimal specificity. This condition affects the psyche as much as the artwork. When choices are continuously anticipated, desire weakens. Curiosity depends on uncertainty; prediction removes it. The individual gradually experiences culture less as a search and more as a reception. Satisfaction becomes passive. Instead of wanting something unknown, one waits for the system to reveal what one supposedly wants.

Yet another possibility remains. The listener can step outside automated recurrence by acting deliberately: tracing origins, supporting creators directly, pursuing history beyond the recommendation. Such actions reintroduce effort into culture. Effort restores proportion between object and experience. A work regains depth when approached intentionally rather than encountered incidentally. The distinction is subtle but decisive. Passive consumption treats culture as an endless supply. Active attention treats it as relationship. In the first case, meaning fades quickly because replacement is guaranteed. In the second, meaning accumulates because discovery requires commitment. Taste becomes not a profile but a trajectory. Technology itself is not the enemy. Every era reshapes perception through its dominant medium. Reproduction once expanded access while dissolving uniqueness. Algorithmic mediation now expands relevance while dissolving intention. Both liberate and constrain simultaneously. The

difference lies in awareness. Without awareness, adaptation becomes surrender; with awareness, it becomes participation. The contemporary challenge is therefore not to reject digital mediation but to recognise its influence. The feed organises experience according to engagement efficiency. Human judgement can introduce other values: difficulty, patience, locality, memory. These qualities resist optimisation because they exceed immediate measurement. They restore texture to perception. Culture has never existed outside technology, yet it has always required attention. When attention is automated, culture risks becoming only atmosphere. When attention is reclaimed, even familiar works regain singularity. The future depends less on machines than on habits of perception. One may live inside recommendations or pass through them toward something chosen.

The algorithm predicts preference; it cannot experience commitment. Commitment remains human because it involves time willingly spent rather than time efficiently captured. By choosing deliberately—seeking context, supporting creators, remembering histories—the individual rebuilds a link between meaning and effort. That link forms identity more reliably than any personalised feed. The system promises endless discovery, yet genuine discovery begins only when prediction fails. In that moment, taste ceases to be delivered and becomes created. Culture then regains depth, and the individual regains authorship over attention. The technological environment remains the same, but its psychological effect changes entirely. Thus the question is not whether algorithms will shape culture—they inevitably will—but whether they will shape the self. When preference is delegated, identity becomes statistical. When preference is practiced, identity becomes narrative. Between those two modes lies the difference between being known by a system and knowing oneself.

Chayka, K. (2022) Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture. London: Jonathan Cape.

The Human After Recognition

The three preceding movements described a progressive externalisation of the self. First, taste migrated from judgement to prediction; second, expression migrated from communication to performance; third, perception migrated from discovery to delivery. Each shift appeared cultural, yet together they reveal a structural transformation. They describe not merely how people behave online but how existence becomes legible at all. The environment no longer waits for the individual to present himself. It anticipates him, measures him, and stabilises him in advance. The question is therefore no longer why identity has become visible everywhere, but why it must be continuously maintained in order for anything else to function. The average self emerged when choice aligned with probability. The performative self emerged when visibility became labour. The predicted self emerged when perception became automated. Combined, they produce the verified self: an entity that exists only insofar as it can be recognised by systems that precede interaction. Recognition ceases to follow presence and begins to constitute it. One does not first appear and then become known; one is known in order to appear. The self therefore moves from biography to status signal, from narrative continuity to operational continuity. A person becomes the persistence of a pattern.

This resolves the first hypothesis. The self cannot finish because recognition cannot stop. Stability once meant consistency of character across time. Now stability means consistency of signal across checkpoints. Identity lives in the interval between verifications and disappears when the interval breaks. The finished individual belonged to a world where memory

guaranteed continuity. The verified individual belongs to a world where systems guarantee continuity. Memory tolerated ambiguity; authentication does not. As a result, the modern subject experiences existence not as completion but as maintenance. To remain present is to remain legible. The anxiety surrounding accounts, passwords, sessions, and confirmations is not administrative inconvenience but ontological pressure. Interruption resembles erasure. One does not fear misunderstanding but non-recognition.

The second hypothesis follows naturally. When systems act, someone must remain responsible. Yet action increasingly originates from automated procedures whose speed exceeds deliberation. The human therefore appears at the boundary of consequence rather than at the moment of decision. A purchase occurs, a message sends, a filter applies, a transaction executes, and only afterwards a name anchors liability. The person becomes the legal surface onto which causality is written. Authority is replaced by attribution. To act becomes to be accountable for processes one did not directly perform. The individual is transformed into an oversight mechanism not because power was taken away but because action accelerated beyond supervision. The signature persists where agency recedes. Existence narrows into permission: a confirmation that a chain of operations may proceed under a stable identity.

The third hypothesis appears within culture itself. If recognition depends on consistency, then deviation introduces friction. Systems reward what integrates smoothly and penalise what interrupts prediction. Distinction once attracted attention because attention was scarce. Now attention is continuous and interruption is costly. The self therefore learns to minimise surprise in order to maximise continuity. Personality becomes compatible format. One no longer struggles for recognition but optimises for acceptance. Honour once depended on risk; recognition now depends on reliability. The dramatic individual destabilises networks; the predictable individual sustains them. Gradually, aspiration shifts from becoming memorable to becoming frictionless. Identity loses heroic dimension and gains operational clarity. To be exceptional is to be difficult to process; to be average is to be easy to maintain. The desire for belonging masks a deeper adaptation: the desire to remain processable.

The fourth hypothesis extends this logic spatially. Recognition functions inside infrastructures, and infrastructures differ. Therefore identity fragments according to the systems that validate it. A person is not one continuous self moving across environments but a series of interoperable confirmations. Each domain recognises a compatible version and ignores the rest. The universal individual dissolves into jurisdictional presence. Borders no longer only separate territories; they separate verification regimes. Movement across them requires translation of identity into acceptable formats. The self travels as a negotiable credential. One does not cross space; one reappears under new conditions of legibility. Continuity becomes a coordinated illusion produced by synchronised databases rather than shared experience.

Seen together, the hypotheses describe a civilisation organised not around production or communication but around confirmation. Culture participates in this order because culture now circulates through the same infrastructures that require recognition. Taste narrows because prediction needs stability. Expression performs because visibility verifies presence. Perception automates because anticipation secures continuity. The verified self is therefore not a side effect of digital culture but its prerequisite. Systems must know who interacts before they can allow interaction. Identity becomes the gateway through which all other activities pass. This also clarifies the paradox of freedom experienced throughout the book. Individuals feel both empowered and constrained because recognition grants capability while determining form.

Access expands as variation contracts. The environment does not forbid action; it structures possibility. One may speak endlessly provided speech remains processable. One may create endlessly provided creation remains classifiable. The boundary appears nowhere and therefore everywhere. Constraint operates as compatibility requirement rather than prohibition. The subject consents because participation depends on consent. Refusal would not produce opposition but absence. The cultural consequences described earlier now reveal their coherence. The average self seeks agreement because disagreement threatens recognisability. The performative self signals constantly because silence resembles disappearance. The predicted self accepts recommendations because prediction stabilises presence. Each behaviour expresses adaptation to an environment where existence equals persistence within recognition loops. Identity ceases to be self-interpretation and becomes uptime. Yet this does not eliminate individuality; it redefines its location. Individuality no longer resides in what the system sees but in what the system cannot anticipate. Not grand rebellion but selective opacity becomes meaningful. The self cannot exit recognition yet can exceed optimisation. Whenever attention lingers beyond efficiency, whenever interpretation replaces reaction, whenever commitment replaces circulation, identity temporarily returns from infrastructure to experience. These moments are small and fragile because they resist automation, but precisely for that reason they preserve narrative within verification.

The future therefore does not hinge on abolishing technological mediation, which is impossible, but on recognising its scope. Recognition is necessary for coordination in complex societies. The danger arises when recognition substitutes entirely for meaning. A person verified everywhere yet understood nowhere becomes operationally present but existentially absent. The challenge is not to escape systems but to prevent equivalence between being recognised and being known. The conclusion of the hypotheses is therefore neither optimistic nor catastrophic. The identity industry does not destroy the self; it stabilises a particular form of it. Humanity persists as accountability within machine processes and as interpretation within lived time. One layer guarantees continuity of operations, the other continuity of experience. Confusion begins when the first claims to exhaust the second. The self becomes impoverished when it accepts verification as completion rather than condition. The age of recognition transforms the ancient question. Instead of asking who one is, society asks whether one matches. Yet the unanswered remainder of the first question continues to produce culture, memory and attachment. Systems require confirmation; humans require significance. As long as these requirements differ, identity cannot fully collapse into infrastructure. The verified self operates; the narrative self understands. The modern individual lives suspended between them. Thus the trajectory described across this work reaches its end: taste averaged, expression monetised, perception predicted, existence authenticated. What began as a transformation of media culminates as a transformation of ontology. The human image becomes the anchor of automated order, yet meaning persists wherever attention exceeds recognition. The final choice is subtle but decisive. One may live entirely as a maintained signal, or one may use the signal to support a life that cannot be reduced to it. The systems will continue to recognise; only the individual can still interpret.

“We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us. The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village. The medium, or process, of our time — electric technology — is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and

every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and reevaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted."

-Marshall McLuhan

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